

# The Long Road Back

kasey8473

Star Wars

Complete



# **The Long Road Back**

**kasey8473**

## Copyright Information

---

This ebook was automatically created by [FicLab](#) v1.0.101 on March 19th, 2024, based on content retrieved from [www.fanfiction.net/s/2799290/](http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2799290/).

The content in this book is copyrighted by [kasey8473](#) or their authorised agent(s). All rights are reserved unless explicitly stated otherwise. Please do not share or republish this work without the express permission of the copyright holder.

If you are the author or copyright holder, and would like further information about this ebook, please read the author FAQ at [www.ficlab.com/author-faq](http://www.ficlab.com/author-faq).

This story was first published on February 13th, 2006, and was last updated on August 25th, 2006.

FicLab ID: SBRuA8lQ/ltuj3fd/5zf00C5S

## Table of Contents

---

Cover  
Title Page  
Copyright Information  
Table of Contents  
Summary  
Prologue: Setting The Stage  
Chapter One: Painful Beginnings  
Chapter Two: Changes Begun  
Chapter Three: Moving On  
Chapter Four: The Dance Begins  
Chapter Five: Insight  
Chapter Six: Personal Revelations  
Chapter Seven: Progress?  
Chapter Eight: Discoveries  
Chapter Nine: Visions and Ghosts, oh my!  
Chapter Ten: My Name Is  
Chapter Eleven: Mistakes  
Chapter Twelve: Home Again  
Chapter Thirteen: It's a Trap  
Chapter Fourteen: Next move? Spring It  
Chapter Fifteen: Babies and Rebels  
Chapter Sixteen: Cleaning Up  
Chapter Seventeen: Tangled Web  
Chapter Eighteen: New Journey  
Chapter Nineteen: Back to Life  
Chapter 20: Children  
Chapter 21: Instinct  
Ch 22: A Little Booze Goes A Long Way  
Ch 23: Leading and Following  
Ch 24: The Twins Revealed  
Ch 25 and Epilogue: End of the Road

## Summary

---

**title** The Long Road Back  
**author** kasey8473  
**source** <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/2799290/>  
**published** February 13th, 2006  
**updated** August 25th, 2006  
**words** 87,901  
**chapters** 26  
**status** Complete  
**rating** Fiction M  
**tags** Anakin Skywalker, Complete, Fanfiction, Humor, Movies, Padmé Amidala, Romance, Star Wars

### Description:

AU. Padmé has survived and after four years as Vader, Anakin surfaces. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him. There will be happy endings for all. Eventually. Story complete.

## Prologue: Setting The Stage

---

**Title:** The Long Road Back

**Author:** kasey8473

**Summary:** AU. Padmé has survived and after four years as Vader, Anakin surfaces. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him. There will be happy endings for all. Eventually.

**Chapter: Prologue: Setting The Stage**

**Rating:** M, for the humor

**Disclaimer:** Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

**Notes:** I've had a few requests for another Padmé survives story, so here it is, on a lighter side than the last one. In fact, it could be said to be downright silly compared to the last 'Padmé survives' story I wrote.

---

"Are we in agreement then," Obi-Wan asked, glancing back and forth between Yoda and Bail Organa. They had given this matter much thought since the twins were born and come to one conclusion: all must be hidden for safety. Palpatine must never know that Padmé lived. Or the children.

"For her safety, agree we do," Yoda said, nodding slowly.

Bail tapped his fingers against the tabletop. "Who can we trust? We'd gladly hide her as one of my wife's handmaidens or Leia's nursemaids —"

"No," Obi-Wan interrupted. He'd tumbled this about his mind in unceasing circles, trying to reason out what would be best for his friend and he knew that would not be. Padmé would not be able to withstand scrutiny so soon after what had occurred. The stress of it would harm her. Obi-Wan was certain of it. "A complete break. Padmé will be in a delicate place when she wakes. I don't think being around her own daughter and having to hide that she is her mother would be beneficial to her. Temporary isolation may be best for her health."

"You have something in mind?" Bail slanted a quizzical stare his direction.

"I do. I've an idea of someone who would keep Padmé safe with her last breath. An old friend of hers whose loyalty was remarkable. I'll make the arrangements."

The meeting was concluded. Obi-Wan began immediate plans.

---

The reports had to be wrong.

Dormé was unable to tear herself away from each new report of Jedi uprisings. It had to be a mistake. She felt in her heart, in her very *gut*, that it was wrong. The Jedi were good, not evil. They wouldn't attempt any such uprising without reason to believe it was for the best. They weren't malicious. She knew that. She watched and watched until she was numb and continued watching hour after hour.

And then the report of Padmé's death. Padmé dead? And by the hands of Jedi? That couldn't be truth, could it?

She was crying when Obi-Wan Kenobi contacted her. What he had to say straightened her spine, steely resolve working through her. Dormé nodded in response to his lengthy explanation. "Of course. I'll do whatever is wished. My lady must be kept safe."

And so it was that Dormé went from packing up her father's cottage to readying it for company. Dormé had left Padmé's service not long after her lady had married Anakin Skywalker. It had been a sad day when she'd left service, but Dormé's father had become sicker than he'd been, falling into dementia, and she'd felt a duty to him. He'd died recently and she'd been at odds with what she was going to do with her life. Any official ventures back in to her previous career would take time. She'd need to be re-certified, take classes and go through more schooling to bring her skills up to date.

But now she had a purpose once more. Dormé had never really considered herself out of Padmé's service, just on a long leave of absence. She would return to duty and begin protecting her lady anew.

---

### ***6 months later:***

Padmé wouldn't speak, preferring to sit quietly by herself day after day, staring at the water. She wanted no company and Dormé understood. She respected the wall her friend had put up about herself. Grief was something Dormé understood well. Eventually, Padmé would want a friend and she'd be waiting.

As she waited, she occupied herself learning Huttese from a learn at home course. As she retrieved the grade from her last test, Dormé permitted herself a tiny, satisfied smile. Wouldn't Obi-Wan be surprised when she sent him the next letter in Huttese? No, not Obi-Wan, she reminded herself. Ben. Ben Kenobi. That's how he wants me to address letters.

Very pleased with herself, and her progress with the confusing language, she fired off a long letter to him, hoping he wouldn't notice how bad her grammar skills really were. She wasn't quite a master at the language and it would take time to learn it properly. Dormé had just enough knowledge off the top of her head to ask 'where is the refresher' and 'why don't we take this to the Hutts'. All in all, her instructor was pleased with her progress as well, assuring her in his remarks that she was learning it faster than many humans.

And why not, she asked herself. It gave her something in common with Obi-Wan. Ben. Giving a little laugh, she sent off her letter.

Obi-Wan was surprised to receive another letter from Dormé so soon and even more surprised when he tried to read it. He turned it this way and that, wondering what bizarre language the woman had taken to using. He shook his head and sighed, vowing to translate it later. She was driving him crazy and she was on Naboo, for crying out loud!

She sent him weird gifts, such as some raw fish thing she'd said was a delicacy on Naboo. He wasn't a fan of raw food if he could help it and the sight and smell of the... what had she called them?...oh yes, the *oysters*, had about made him ill. She'd sent several types — large and small —, all in sauces. He'd tried them, just so he could honestly tell her he had when she asked. Her gifts were all like that. Strange. Bizarre. He wondered how much she'd gotten out in the past few years, finally deciding that it hadn't been enough.

Her letters were novel length and if she described the lake one more time, he was going to drown her in it.

Not really, but it was nice to dream on occasion, especially after he imagined years of this.

Maybe Padmé would step in some time soon. Oh, how he hoped that day would come!

---

***6 more months later:***

He didn't seem happy to see her. Padmé yes. Her no. In fact, Obi-Wan's greeting was downright surly. Dormé ignored the tone and brought in their cases, sweeping past the boxes she'd sent on ahead. She'd given him a good weeks notice and was surprised to find he hadn't touched any of the boxes. She'd thought he'd have things all put away by now. No matter. She'd take care of it later. "Where shall I put these," she asked.

He crossed his arms. "You and Padmé will be sharing a room. My house is not huge."

"I never expected it was."

Obi-Wan directed a pointed stare towards the boxes piled about the living area.

Dormé set the cases down and cast a quick glance outside. Padmé was sitting on the front steps and was watching the sunset. "Most of the things are Padmé's. Only three boxes are mine and two of those are clothing. We'll put everything away and you won't notice the extra."

His expression indicated that he doubted that very much.

"Really," she insisted. "I promise."

---

So he wasn't supposed to notice the knick-knacks and the datapads and the perfume spritzers and the jewelry and all those other things that were taking over his home? Fat chance. Obi-Wan sighed, listening to Dormé and Padmé as they made dinner.

No, it was far more accurate to say that he listened to Dormé. Padmé made little noise. He could count the number of words she'd spoken since arriving on one hand and missing three fingers. Dormé though. The woman talked and talked... Didn't she ever shut up? He'd never



noticed before how much she talked. He found himself wondering just when she paused to take a breath, because it seemed like she never paused at all. Was it his destiny to hear her voice chattering on for the rest of his days? Fervently, he hoped Padmé would begin talking again.

He sniffed cautiously, letting himself notice the smells coming from the kitchen. Whatever they were making didn't smell *too* bad. This meal was their treat. Dormé had brought some other thing she called a delicacy with them and insisted on preparing it.

There had been a faint, but definitely *there*, smile lurking on Padmé's lips at that, as though she knew Obi-Wan wasn't going to like the meal. He was very afraid he wasn't going to like many meals from here on out unless he prepared them. He was a simple man, really he was. He didn't need fancy foods. He actually liked bland meals that were the same every day. Soups, sandwiches, some fruit...

"Someone save me," he whispered.

No one answered and he thought he heard the faint ghost of laughter from behind him.

Probably Qui-Gon. His old Master had found each interaction with Dormé extremely humorous so far...

---

Dormé couldn't believe that a man so neat and orderly as Obi-Wan Kenobi *didn't* have organized shelves. She shook her head, trying to locate a spice he'd claimed was there somewhere. How would he know, she wondered. They aren't even alphabetized.

The task of organizing the kitchen took her the rest of the day.

---

She was moving his things.

Obi-Wan crossed his arms, watching Dormé with annoyance prickling at him. Who did she think she was, just changing things around like that? "Dormé," he said, then repeated her name until she looked at him, pausing on the stepstool with her arms full of containers.

"I heard you the first time, Obi... Ben. What?"

"You're moving things."

"Yes. Your point?"

"You didn't ask."

"The kitchen is a common area. It's not like your bedroom or anything, though that room needs organizing too." Ascending the stepstool the rest of the way, she glanced at him over her shoulder as she put the containers away. "Is there a problem?"

"I liked it the other way and don't you dare move a thing in my bedroom."

"The other way was inefficient and I'll be sure to stay out of your bedroom." She returned to the floor, reaching for his tea tin. "If I'm going to be cooking in here, and I have been, I

have to be able to find things.”

Quickly, he snatched the tin up. “No. Not this. Qui-Gon gave this to me and it will stay on the countertop.”

She put her hands on her trim hips. “It’d be better up on the shelf by where you make the tea each morning.”

“I like it where it was.”

Dormé smiled softly, took the tin, and set it on the counter where it had been. “All right. If you’d prefer to take a few extra steps more than necessary each morning, then who am I to argue?”

“Exactly.” He quirked a brow at her, a gesture she returned before leaving the room. Obi-Wan watched her go, considering her reasoning. He really could adjust to not walking all the way across the kitchen and back first thing. It did make sense to put it on the shelf. It wouldn’t hurt to try it out for a day or two. He could always move it back to the counter.

Obi-Wan put the tin on the shelf.

Dormé returned, triumph in her gaze when she noticed the tin.

He cleared his throat. “Your reasoning had merit, but don’t expect to organize my house to your tastes.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Her smile, warm and filled with humor, sent a little bit of confusing attraction shooting through him. He nodded and quickly decided he’d better find something else to do.

---

***A few more months later:***

Padmé had declined to join them in town, claiming she was content to spend a quiet day reading and drawing. Obi-Wan noticed that most of her drawings didn’t actually look like anything, but then, who was he to criticize? He had no ability in that direction at all. If she thought she was sketching something that looked like something, then who was he to argue with her?

He listened with half an ear to Dormé, just enough attention that he could answer any questions she might send his way. He had an ulterior motive with this trip and didn’t want her to know it. She needed to loosen up and he thought a couple drinks would help. So they were headed for the nearest bar. Obi-Wan had it planned out. They’d have a drink or two and... did she just stop talking?

Yes, he wasn’t mistaken. The magical talking wonder had fallen silent. In fact, she seemed a bit uncertain as he parked the speeder and led her towards The Growling Bantha. Obi-Wan felt a sliver of mischief working through him and decided to give in just this once. He’d been good all these months. It was time to let himself have a little fun.

---

Dormé wasn't sure about this trip into town. She wished Padmé had consented to go with them, but her lady had been firm.

You need to have some time without me, she'd said. Get to know Ben and not that arguing you've been doing. He's a nice man, Dormé. You two need to iron out these differences.

But arguing was all she knew how to do it seemed. She never *meant* to start an argument with him. It just sort of happened. And now she was talking and talking to fill the silence. She didn't like silence. It made her wonder what he was thinking and then she got nervous. Dormé let her last sentence trail off. He'd not said one word the entire trip.

I'm a chatterbox, she thought miserably. He's said it enough since we got here.

It had been a very long time since she'd been out and about with a man who wasn't family. Her last outing had been with Typho right before she'd left Coruscant, which was longer than she liked to think about. They'd had a lovely dinner and seen a show, but they'd both known their relationship couldn't go on any more. He was on Coruscant most of the time and caring for her father didn't leave Dormé a lot of time to socialize. Their break had been amicable.

Blast it, she just didn't know how to act anymore!

Dormé followed Obi... Ben into the bar, staring for a moment at the Bantha heads on the walls. Nice place. While he ordered drinks, she found a table for them, wiping it clean with a cloth she'd had tucked in her pocket. It didn't look like anyone had touched the table in a few years, but at least wiping it off dislodged the worst of the crumbs and such.

"Well, here you go. Bottoms up."

The blue colored concoction he set before her wasn't what she preferred, but since he was paying, Dormé decided not to be picky. Raising it, she took a sip. It was... interesting. After a few sips, her entire mouth went numb and she couldn't really taste it anymore. Nor could she feel her teeth or tongue.

"Not bad," she managed.

"It's my favorite cocktail."

"I usually drink Theed blasters or shuura daiquiris."

"Well, it's good to try something new on occasion." He smiled, a twinkle in his eyes. Dormé liked the bit of humor there. It made him look younger. Very attractive.

"I suppose," she replied with a smile, taking another sip. No, it didn't taste too bad at all. A plan began to form in her mind. Maybe she remembered how to do this after all.

---

How was he to have known that two drinks would get her drunk?

He watched Dormé with wide eyes. Where had she learned to dance like that? All wiggling and twisting about. It was... erotic. He shifted in his seat.

She leaned across the table, undoing another button on her shirt as she picked up his drink and took a big gulp. "I am having so much fun," she told him, before returning to her

dancing.

My, it was warm in here today.

He really shouldn't have done this, should he? She was very drunk. Plastered was the proper word, he thought.

"Obi-Ben, dance with me," she called. He wasn't annoyed by her inability to use the proper name this time. In fact, he'd sort of become used to it. He glanced about the bar, noticing that there were several patrons who looked more than willing to take her up on the dance offer if he didn't. He downed the last of his drink and stood, moving to her and taking her in his arms.

She stopped wiggling and rested her cheek against his shoulder, arms around him. He wondered why that disappointed him. He'd wanted her to stop dancing a moment ago and when she had... Raising a hand, he touched the backs of his fingers to her cheek, smoothed them across her skin. So soft.

Dormé opened her eyes, raised her head a notch. "Ben," she whispered.

One good look in her eyes told him what he needed to know. She wasn't drunk after all, was she? Tipsy perhaps, and taking advantage of his assumption to get him to dance with her. He was right, wasn't he? "You're not drunk," he said.

"Are you sure of that," she returned, slipping her arms from around his waist and up to his neck. Her fingers slid into his hair. "I could be."

"You're not."

Dormé smiled and laughed a little. "Found out. I'm not entirely sober, but neither am I soused."

"Soused? Interesting choice."

"I've always liked it."

He slid his hands along her waist. There was an impulsive urge growing inside him. Obi-Wan held her even closer, pressed her to him. She went willingly. "You drive me crazy, Dormé."

Her smile widened. "I like you too."

Lowering his head, he touched his lips to hers for a few seconds. A short kiss, sweet. Obi-Wan enjoyed it very much. He wanted more kisses from her and, if he allowed himself to think about it, he wanted more than kisses. By the look on her face, she felt the same way. "What will we tell Padmé," he asked quietly.

Dormé tilted her head. "I don't think she'll be surprised."

He wondered why, but the thought slipped away when she kissed him, long and slow.

---

Padmé was awake at dawn, like she always was, watching the sunrise and hoping Dormé and Obi-Wan had settled their differences in the manner she'd thought they would. She would

have to be blind not to see the attraction growing between the two and if they needed a little push, then so be it. She'd push, because if they were wrapped up with each other, they wouldn't be watching over her so much. She could concentrate on preparing herself for when the time was right to leave.

She wasn't going to stay here forever. One day, perhaps soon, she'd know it was time to break from them and go. But when? Padmé waited. The certainty grew inside her that she would know.

The time to leave would present itself and she would not be able to mistake it for anything else. Somehow, she would know.

Padmé didn't question it.

---

Anakin Skywalker clawed his way up to full consciousness, using all of his strength to shove Vader back behind him. He looked around his quarters and decided there had to be a change. He couldn't keep living this way. Darkness, death, destruction and far too much pain for a single person to bear.

Vader, he decided, had to disappear. If it took him the rest of his life, he would regain control of his body.

He promised himself that. It was one promise he was determined to never break.

## Chapter One: Painful Beginnings

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin surfaces. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him. There will be happy endings for all. Eventually.

Chapter One: **Painful Beginnings**

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

Notes: The humor will pick up in later chapters. Have to get everyone situated first.

---

Every day was the same. He should have known, shouldn't he? Why should the everyday details of being a Sith be any less boring than the everyday details of being a Jedi?

Vader had gotten through the days with intimidation tactics on his employees, routinely choking those who annoyed him, but Anakin was determined not to do that if he could help it. He was trying to *regain* control, not slide backwards into the darkness he'd consigned himself to.

Inside the black suit he was forced to wear, Anakin sighed, hand raising reflexively to run through his hair and encountering the helmet instead. He heaved another, longer sigh. He kept forgetting his entire head was encased. It wasn't natural to him. He still remembered having hair. And that matter wasn't the only one he routinely forgot.

He forgot the children were gone. He forgot there was no one at the Temple. He forgot he and Obi-Wan were no longer on speaking terms and undoubtedly would be so for a very long time. He hated that. Anakin found himself wanting to speak with his former friend and Master, to unburden himself to him as he should have done back then, yet knew that even if he found where Obi-Wan was hiding, the older man wouldn't wish to have a casual chat.

No, they'd end up fighting, dredging up a painful past. The same past Anakin longed to make right. He'd erred terribly in trusting Palpatine on anything. The old Sith didn't care about him. He never had. All he cared about was power. Since Anakin had undergone the operation after Mustafar, Palpatine had ceased to behave as a friend would. If Anakin hadn't realized the line between Master and Apprentice before, he certainly knew it now. Palpatine made certain he knew it.

He longed with all of his being to go back in time. He wanted to sit with Obi-Wan and tell him everything.

I'm an idiot, he berated himself. What was I thinking?

The answer rose in his mind as an image: Padmé, his beautiful, intelligent wife that he'd tossed aside in the end out of misplaced anger. He even forgot she was dead. She had never done anything to deliberately hurt him and he'd assumed the worst. He'd chosen his path for her and let himself become carried away by visions of power and glory. He'd become greedy and destroyed the very things and people he'd cared for. Childbirth had not killed Padmé. He had.

And he felt the pain of her loss every day since then. He felt as though a part of him was ripped away. All his efforts to date at closure had been unsuccessful. Still, Anakin could not accept that she had died. It did not feel right to him that he had killed her, but Palpatine insisted he had. He needed to move forward, yet how did one come to grips with murdering one's wife?

"He goes to Naboo," he said, cringing a little at the sound of his voice through the mask. He hated that rasping hissing that accompanied every breath. Once, he had breathed easily, without needing machines to aid him. He had taken deep breaths of sweet air all on his own.

He sat in his shuttle, anxiety growing the closer he came to Naboo. He had to do this. He had to let himself fall into the past. It was part of his own solitary attempts to save himself. He was making himself relive the past, to remember where things had gone so wrong. Maybe it would work and maybe not. Going to Naboo was the most painful thing he had tried so far.

Vader, of course, tried to alternately talk him out of it and push him into it.

*Go on, Anakin, try it. Go for it. We both know how good you are dealing with emotional issues. Why even try? Let me handle it all. I'm good at it. I'm good with the emotional aspects. Let me take them. You won't have to think about it anymore. No reason to go there... Set on it are you? Very well. You'll cave under the pressure of memories in minutes at most. Go ahead. It'll just bring you back closer to me. Go there if you think you're strong enough. You're not. You're weak. I'm the strong one.*

In the wee hours of the morning, Anakin Skywalker, dressed as Darth Vader, stepped out of his shuttle on Naboo and began to take a tour of the past. Memories were his only companions. He forced himself to walk the streets of Theed, ignoring the whispers and the terrified expressions of the people he passed. Would he turn and kill them if they made a sound? That was what he knew they were wondering. Anakin knew people cringed and cowered when they saw him. That wasn't what he'd ever wanted.

Palpatine had turned him into a monster and he had let him.

Inside the mask, tears made tracks down his cheeks.

Vader was greatly disappointed to be wrong. Anakin did not budge from his place in ascendance under the weight of memories.

---

Padmé Amidala Skywalker had thought she was dying when she'd felt consciousness begin to leave her after she'd birthed the twins. She'd been too weak to do much of anything except let death take her, so she'd been surprised to wake in a strange place. The bed had been soft, the room shadowed and smelling of Naboo in the spring. She'd tried to get up and found Dormé suddenly there with her, aiding her weak stumblings.

She was even now surprised by how the time had gone since that day.

Obi-Wan, Bail and Yoda had come up with a complicated plot to hide both her and the twins, splitting them all up and faking Padmé's death to make Palpatine believe she was no longer a threat. They'd contacted Dormé, whom Obi-Wan had remembered as being exceptionally loyal in her duties, and from there, Dormé had helped plan Padmé's escape. Padmé made a break from her former life, leaving her family, Ellé and Moteé safe from scrutiny. Who, they'd reasoned, would remember Dormé, who'd left service to care for her ill father? She was beyond the contemplation of the Empire.

The two of them had spent a year hidden in the hills of the lake country, while Obi-Wan and Bail settled the twins into their new homes. Slowly, Padmé's physical strength had returned. Her mental health was not as good during those months. Obi-Wan had been frank with her on what had occurred after she'd collapsed on Mustafar. No one had wanted him to tell her all of it, but she'd insisted. Padmé had told him she needed to know so she didn't harbor any false illusions for her future. She needed the terrible truth. He'd held her hand as he spoke, gently stroking the back of it, a center of calm in a life that whirled about her as a storm.

She knew it was Anakin in the horrible black suit and it tore her up inside to see him like that...

Dormé had banned news reports. She didn't think it healthy for Padmé to watch report after report, her hand reaching out towards the black-suited figure.

For weeks Padmé had not spoken, preferring to sit at the waters edge and relive treasured memories. But then she'd asked Dormé, "What now?"

Then, Dormé took her to Tatooine.

They'd been there ever since, living in Obi-Wan's small house, rarely going into town. Occasionally, Padmé got to visit Luke. Those were moments she treasured. Owen would bring him out there and stand silently to one side as Padmé held her son and wondered on the changes that occurred so rapidly in him. Her questions were answered in monosyllables and sometimes... Sometimes Owen would smile and give her something Beru had made. A scarf to cover her face with during the midday sunlight. A few pieces of cake. Once Beru had sent a holoimage of Luke, toddling about and saying 'mama', that word all children try out as they learn language. Beru had thought Padmé would like seeing that.

Of course the image had gone back home with Owen. She couldn't have kept it, though she wished dearly she could.

Luke was older now and soon, the visits would have to stop. He'd wonder who the woman was he was taken to see and she couldn't have herself put in a position of trying to explain. Nor could she do that to Owen and Beru. She had to let Luke go now.

Padmé stepped to the rocks at the bottom of the slope and began to walk on them, hopping from rock to rock. This was her home now, as much as she hated this hot planet. It was far too warm for comfort and dry, the sand getting everywhere, as Anakin had once stated. Obi-Wan, Bail and Yoda had decided that she'd be safest here after her initial convalescence was finished, so here she was.



She glanced back at the house, seeing her two friends sitting on the steps watching her. They were talking about her she knew. Obi-Wan didn't want her to leave Tatooine and Padmé had made up her mind to do so. The time felt right. It wasn't the dangerous undertaking he insisted it was. It had been four years and the Empire thought her dead. She only wanted to go back to Naboo, to Varykino. She needed some kind of peace on the issue of Anakin. Closure.

She knew she'd never love another man and she didn't care to love another. No matter what Anakin had done, they were still married. They were husband and wife and she would consider them such until the day she really died.

Obi-Wan didn't want her to go. He told her she should stay here with him and Dormé. It was his opinion that she should live out her days there with them, settling into a rut, watching life pass her by. She'd had enough excitement for about thirty people in her young life. Of course, he didn't put it that way. He spoke of danger to her if she was found out and of danger to the babies.

Babies.

She paused on the rocks, biting her lip as she looked across the desert. Obi-Wan and Dormé thought she didn't know on that matter. They thought she was too wrapped up in her continuing grief to notice their happiness. Since going into hiding, Obi-Wan seemed to have thrown that Jedi vow not to love right out the window. He'd married Dormé two years earlier in a quiet ceremony with herself, Owen and Beru Lars present. He'd *married*. Jedi weren't supposed to do that. A little romance she could understand, but marriage?

She recalled Obi-Wan's words when she'd asked him about the vow Anakin had told her about. He'd tilted his head with the most amused stare, as though he couldn't believe *she* of all people was asking.

"Can a Jedi love? Of course we can. We can have all the relationships we wish, as long as we can keep ourselves from deep attachments that might keep us from doing our job." He'd paused. "Many of the children in the Temple were children of Jedi, Padmé. I thought you'd realized that, being as... close to Anakin as you were."

"But you married Dormé," she replied. "*Married*, Obi-Wan. Make this make sense to me, because Jedi can't marry."

"There *are* no more Jedi," he'd said quite reasonably. "Yoda and I are it for the most part. With only a few of us scattered about, I think an exception is allowed at this point. My opinion, of course, and I realize Yoda might disagree with me on the matter."

Since then, she'd had the urge to find Anakin and smack him while shouting 'you big dummy' at him over and over, along with a few strong epithets on his misunderstanding of the code. Relationships, just not marriage.

Padmé crossed her arms. Dormé was pregnant. She had to be, because Padmé well remembered the sickness and the sleepiness and the things that went with that state. Dormé was experiencing several of them, not to mention her sudden shift from being cold all the time to being hot all the time. In Padmé's opinion, this was the best time for her to go. She could leave for a few months, perhaps a year or so and come back when the baby was old enough that she wouldn't feel the pain of giving up her own children.

As though that pain will ever go away, a tiny voice whispered in her mind. You're dreaming.

It was settled, she decided. Obi-Wan and Dormé just didn't know it yet.

---

"Talk some sense into her," Obi-Wan said for the fifth time, lips twisting with disgust. He'd spent the better part of an hour arguing with Padmé over the wisdom of her taking that trip to Naboo and he knew she would do whatever she pleased in the end. He could not keep her here against her will. Obi-Wan sighed. He remembered Captain Typho once saying that he'd be more concerned about Padmé doing something foolish than Anakin. That woman, he thought, was the most stubborn woman he'd ever been acquainted with, his Dormé included.

His Dormé. Obi-Wan glanced at her as she joined him on the steps to watch Padmé on the rocks in the Tatooine twilight. He'd been wary of getting into a relationship with another of Padmé's handmaidens, but this one had certainly worked out far better than the first. He'd never imagined that one day he'd be able to have a wife. The previous handmaiden had accused him of callously breaking her heart by saying there was no future for them that included legal marriage. She'd cried and carried on and finally stopped as though a switch had been thrown, informing him in an icy tone that whatever they had was over. He recalled feeling like the very lowest of the low right then.

How strange that his future had included marriage after all. Sometimes he had the oddest urge to find that lady and apologize to her. He had not meant to hurt her.

Dormé leaned against him, making herself comfortable. It was a wonder to him that they had fallen for each other. He would not have predicted it when she and Padmé had arrived. In fact, she had irritated him quite a bit with her bossy attitude and insistence on rearranging his belongings in the rooms.

"You know very well I can't talk my lady into anything, Ben. No one can. Once she makes up her mind, that's it. Her path is set."

Was it ever. Padmé was as unbending as he was on the issue and he knew they would wake up one day soon and find her gone. It was a foregone conclusion and Obi-Wan resigned himself to it. "She's stubborn."

"You've known her how long and you still expect her to be otherwise?"

He turned, putting an arm around her and a hand on her belly. "Well, if she *does* go, you are not to go with her. I'll not have you endangering our baby. You'll stay here, safe and sound."

Dormé covered his hand with hers. "I can take care of myself."

"I know you can. You don't need to prove it." He knew Dormé was as capable as Padmé and about as stubborn.

Her attention returned to Padmé, who had turned and was watching them now. "She wouldn't take me with her anyway."

The comment caught his attention, but she would not explain it. Moments later, Padmé passed them, voicing her intention of making an early night of it. She seemed true to her word, but with the inevitability of her flight from them on his mind, Obi-Wan readied the speeder. If she went, he'd rather know the vehicle would not break down halfway to town than wonder if she'd gotten there.

He turned in shortly after Dormé, pretending to sleep as he heard Padmé leave the house and Dormé follow her. His wife had not dressed, only thrown on her robe over her nightgown and he could hear their conversation perfectly well. Obi-Wan did nothing and when Dormé returned, he held her close.

---

She took nothing with her, nothing that might hold her down. In her life, it had been a rare occurrence to travel light and she found she was looking forward to it. It was going to be a challenge. Padmé looked forward to something to keep her mind occupied. With light steps, she made her way outside and to the speeder, hearing someone behind her. She glanced back, knowing it was likely Dormé and was proven correct.

"Go back inside," Padmé ordered, looking the speeder over and noting that it was ready. She spied a small pouch on the passenger seat and opened it, not wanting to take anything of Obi-Wan or Dormé's with her. Inside she found various things that would make this trip much easier. She smiled softly to herself. Obi-Wan was thoughtful that way. He would see her taken care of as long as he could.

"My lady, *Padmé*. Don't do this."

Her arm was grasped, Dormé's fingers digging in.

"You can't follow where I have to go, Dormé. Go back to your house and your husband and enjoy the life you have here together. It's precious and before you know it, it'll be gone. Trust me."

Dormé released Padmé's arm. "My lady please. Stay here."

Padmé hugged her. "Take care of that baby. If all goes well, I'll be back next year or so."

---

Dormé didn't want her to go. She was more than half afraid that Padmé wasn't ready for this step, though logically she knew she had to be if she'd set herself to it.

"My *lady*," Dormé heard the desperation in her own voice, but Padmé didn't acknowledge it, taking another few steps away. "It's dangerous out there." There were Tusken Raiders and creatures and every manner of dangerous things. Night here was not gentle and never had been.

"There's always danger. I don't think there's a place in this galaxy that is without danger anymore. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. No one knows I'm alive, Dormé. As far as anyone who sees me is concerned, I'm just a look-alike. Padmé is dead. I'll be careful. I promise. This is something I have to do."

With that, Padmé was gone. Dormé was reminded of another time when they had parted ways. She remembered the bus, and Padmé walking away with Anakin Skywalker. Considering how *that* had turned out in the end, she wasn't entirely comforted by Padmé's reassurances. With a troubled heart, she returned to bed and her husband's loving embrace.

## Chapter Two: Changes Begun

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Two: Changes Begun

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

Notes: Completely disregarding Vader/Anakin's real physical condition as put forth in many sources recently...

---

As Vader, Anakin went to Varykino. He had no trouble gaining entry and for the large part, the wedding party going on did not disturb him. They were surprised, of course, that the empire would send him, but they were honored... Blah, blah, blah. Whatever. He could walk around the building and grounds all he wanted. Which he did, wondering as he strolled if the building was still owned by Padmé's family. No answer suddenly burst into his mind and he didn't feel like asking.

Anakin headed for the balcony, ignoring the large spread of food and drink in the dining room. He never ate in front of another person, not with his appearance as it was. The scarring on his face wasn't quite as bad as it could have been, yet was still enough to cause him discomfort for another person to see. He disliked having people staring at him as he tried to eat. Palpatine occasionally forced him to eat with others present. It delighted his Master to humiliate and humble Anakin in any way he could, continuing reminders that he wasn't what he had been.

*Good riddance to that youth, Vader murmured. He was weak. You're weak. Face it. Without me you are nothing. A shallow man with shallow ambition. I'm the one who gives us strength, Anakin. I'm the one who has gotten us where we are.*

And where are we, he countered. In servitude to a tyrant. Enslaved. The same way we began our life. How is that desirable?

He found someone already there. For a long moment, he stood at the door, watching her, this girl he saw with the long hair and the flowing dress.

She was not Padmé. He had to tell himself that several times. For one thing, she was too young, likely younger than Anakin himself. Her hair was similar to Padmé's, long and curled, but the color was dark blond, not dark brown, and she was taller than his wife had been by

several inches. Nevertheless, Anakin drank in the sight of her. It had been too long since he'd seen an image of Padmé and this young woman satisfied a bit of that longing.

Palpatine refused to have any images of her anywhere his pet apprentice could see. No sense in dwelling on the past, was there, he'd said. She's dead already. Get on with it. It seemed strange to Anakin that Palpatine would not rub in Padmé's death more. Knowing now the sorts of things his Master liked to use against him, he would have thought her death would be the ultimate weapon. But Palpatine didn't use it anymore after that one time. He rarely mentioned her and if he did, it was with contempt and impatience, as though she was not worth remembering.

*Padmé betrayed us, Anakin. She and Obi-Wan both. Don't you remember that little part?*

He tried to tune out Vader's voice.

The woman glanced over her shoulder, fear rippling across her pretty features. Ignoring it, he stepped towards her, joining her at the rail. "Describe the evening to me," he requested. His voice through the mask made the request sound like an order. He didn't intend it as such. She could refuse or answer, he didn't care which.

Her gaze flicked down him and back up. Slowly, she gave a nod of consent and swallowed hard. When she spoke, he recognized the accent and thought a moment on where he'd heard it before. Dormé. She had that accent. Was this woman from that same region? Anakin frowned. Why ever was he thinking about Dormé? "The air is cooling, but the breeze is still warm, carrying the scents of wildflowers and water. There will likely be rain this evening."

Anakin watched, darkly amused by her attempts at nonchalance, as though she spoke with a Sith Lord every day. He smiled, let his glance drift over her, surprised to feel a stirring inside him. A yearning.

His smile faded and he stared at her as he had once stared at Padmé, in appreciation for her feminine charms. He looked and what he saw pleased him. The thrust of her breasts, the indent of her waist, and the curve of her hips. And then the slim column of her neck and the line of her back.

Something stirred... Life. He felt as though he had been dead and was now coming back to life.

His hand raised, touched her back. She stiffened. Anakin sensed her terror of him and was saddened because he could not feel her skin through the glove he wore. The skin of her back looked smooth and soft.

She was holding her breath, pressed tightly to the balcony, as though she intended to merge with it. Her jaw was clenched hard and he surmised that sheer will was keeping her from screaming. What was she thinking? Did she wonder what was behind the mask? Was her imagination conjuring up gruesome images and frightened ideas of why he was touching her back? Did she think he would cart her off to be part of some sort of harem? Palpatine had been amused by rumors of Imperial harems and not discouraged them.

The idea was ridiculous in his opinion. Palpatine didn't lust after women, he lusted after power. Any woman he'd had anything with had been a means to an end: power of some sort.

Anakin hadn't even considered until this moment that he himself could still feel those sort of longings. He had assumed after Mustafar and the burns... But he *could* feel those longings. He *did* feel them, and a physical response to the longings.

Now that he knew...

Anakin lifted his hand from her, returned it to the railing. "You may go."

He remembered what it had been like to have a woman look at him with love and wanted to revisit that place. He wanted to take off the helmet and feel soft lips on his and gentle fingertips trailing his skin. Anakin wanted to feel. No more hiding away and running from everything. No more terror from all who saw him. This was not a life, it was a hellish prison.

I was loved once, he thought. And I will be again, whether Palpatine likes it or not.

A seed of further rebellion was planted in his mind, sprouting quickly in the Naboo evening.

---

The trip to Naboo was uneventful and while Padmé had hoped to find Varykino empty, she instead found the remnants of a wedding party helping to clean up after their reception. She didn't recognize anyone, but supposed the family could be friends of her parents or sister, made since Padmé's 'death'. They were all abuzz with the news that the empire had honored their little reception with the appearance of the Emperor's right hand, Darth Vader.

She had started at that, looked nervously about and been told that he had gone hours earlier after startling the bride's sister out on the balcony. The girl was still upset.

Curious, Padmé searched her out. The girl, perhaps eighteen, was with another girl, hesitant to tell what had upset her. Padmé asked to speak with her and slowly managed to draw the story from the girl.

She had been out on the balcony and Lord Vader had followed her, joined her at the railing and asked her to describe the evening. After she had, he had touched her back in a suggestive manner. The girl had asked in all seriousness if there was any truth to the rumors of secret harems and was she going to be taken away?

Padmé did her best to reassure the girl. She didn't think there could be any truth to that particular rumor. The description of the incident prompted a wondering in her mind of why Anakin had come *here* and why had he touched that girl's back? Had he lost himself in memory? It gave her something to think about and she took her leave of the place without staying as she'd intended, instead going to the cottage she and Dormé had shared.

It was habitable still, and clean. Padmé bought supplies and settled in, then tried to find diversions to keep her mind and body occupied. Her first idea led her to a large building outside the nearest town.

She stared at the large sign that read 'Nursery'. Couldn't this place be normal and be called a greenhouse? Of all the things the local greenhouse had to be called, 'nursery' was the absolute worst. It gave her terrible pangs for her two children. Was fate picking on her?

Padmé pushed through the doors and was immediately greeted by a salesman. She let herself be talked into several pretty flowering plants and one scraggly piece of greenery that looked as though it needed a bit of love. Ivy, she thought it was called. Well, no matter what it looked like, he gave it to her free with her purchase and wasn't that a good thing?

After a few hours of browsing and daydreaming about her tiny cottage surrounded by a pretty flower garden she'd tended herself, she toted her purchases home. Then came the process of planting and watering, which took her the rest of the afternoon and part of the evening. She followed her diagrams carefully, envisioning the loveliness that would bloom. This had to be easier than planting from seeds. She already knew she was a failure at that.

Padmé was too tired to fix dinner. Snagging a make-do dinner of crackers and cheese, she managed to fall asleep while watching the latest Senatorial proceedings on the HoloNet. She didn't have the energy to yell at those idiots she'd worked with. Really, how stupid could they be? It amazed her that some of them could even function.

For a week, she watered her garden and for a week she watched her pretty flowers wither away.

That greenery sure perked up though. In fact, it began to spread...

---

It was not difficult to make an appointment with a human doctor and make him forget about it when it was over. Anakin had done it before, but never on the scale he was currently planning. He went first to his personal physician.

"I wish an honest and thorough assessment of my health."

"Yes, Lord Vader," the man replied.

Anakin waved a hand. "You will not inform the Emperor of this visit."

"I will not inform the Emperor of this visit."

"You will not inform anyone of this visit."

"I will not inform anyone of this visit."

"You will tell me the truth of my physical condition." The man dutifully repeated the words.

With the formalities in place, he subjected himself to several painful hours of prodding and poking and left the office with an idea of what needed to be done. He was relieved to learn that for four years, Palpatine had been altering medical records and programming droids to give him false information. Anakin was not in as bad a shape as he'd been led to believe, though he was in bad shape.

He needed quite a bit of reconstruction on the burn scars and it was recommended that his mechanics be updated. Marvelous advances had been made in the field in the past four years and he should have new cybernetic limbs. That prognosis alone gave him a healthy respect for having a human doctor instead of a droid tending him. Droids tended to look at his limbs and see only that they were functioning as they should. Aesthetics were wasted on droids.



As for his lungs, there was a slight chance he could regain some lung capacity, but the inner scarring was quite extensive. Any efforts there would be slow and painful and likely frustrating. If he wished to go without the mask, he would have to keep a portable respirator with oxygen tank nearby and even that was no guarantee of any sort of comfort. The physician had an idea for his voice box, but needed to research it a bit more and there was a revolutionary new eye surgery just beginning to garner attention that might help his vision.

Then, there were the mental and emotional issues. It was advised that he see a therapist to come to grips with the changes in his life.

Fine, he decided. He'd do that. He'd talk to a therapist and work through his angers and issues. If it would help him regain himself, then he'd do anything. What he would not do was continue to live like this. He had made a promise to himself and he was going to keep it.

And so, he began the process, which was just as painful and slow and humiliating as he'd thought it would be. However, even as bad as it was, it was never as painful and humiliating as Palpatine's comments and actions.

---

It was a strange experience, Padmé reflected, to visit one's own grave and set flowers upon it as though simply another mourner. She went there as a goodbye to her former life, letting go of the last of who she had been.

Okay, she wasn't quite to the point of that lofty goal, but she hoped to get there someday. As the weeks had passed, she'd had a long time to think on what had happened and what had, ultimately, gone wrong. Now that she'd thought on it all, she was hoping to release it into the past and make a quiet life for herself here on Naboo. She intended to be a hermit, living alone, going few places and keeping always to herself.

Her grave was well-tended, with masses of flowers and plenty of mourners still after four years. She kept her cloak hood up and her head down, waiting until a small family of mourners had stepped away to go to the stone.

It was a shock to realize that the small family was her sister, brother-in-law and nieces.

Padmé paused on the walkway leading to the grave, holding the flowers to her chest. With one hand, she fastened the veil to hide her face and proceeded at a slower pace to the stone. When she went to kneel, she dropped the bouquet, flowers scattering.

"Let me help you," a familiar voice said.

Sola knelt beside her, helping to gather the flowers back into a bouquet. Padmé stared at her, hoping she wouldn't burst into tears and felt them prickling in the corners of her eyes anyway. "Thank you," she whispered.

Sola handed them to her with a small, sad smile. "You're welcome. My sister loved those flowers. She used to say that any flower that can grow in desolation is hardy and worth more than a glance. Not every flower can be exotic, but all are beautiful."

Padmé mouthed the words as Sola said them.

“Not many people knew her preference in flowers. Only one other person has brought these.” Sola gestured to one very large bouquet set slightly back from all the rest. In the center of the bouquet was a flash of metal. Padmé couldn’t tell what the metal was. “You must have known her personally to know her preference.”

She shook her head, avoiding Sola’s eyes and keeping her voice a whisper. “I barely knew her.”

“Still, to know this flower...” She frowned, leaning closer. “Did we meet once, you and I? You seem familiar to me. Were you a handmaiden at one point?”

“I do not recall us meeting.”

Sola nodded. “Forgive me. I just...” She touched Padmé’s shoulder, gave it a squeeze and was gone, walking back down the path.

Padmé continued to kneel as mourners went by, holding her bouquet. When no more went by her, she glanced around to find herself alone. Only then did she go to the large bouquet, reaching out to it. Her fingers grasped the metal and she brought it close, recognizing the design. It was a small holographic picture case Anakin had kept. After a moment of fumbling with it, Padmé remembered how to turn it on.

She saw herself on the balcony of the Coruscant apartment, laughing and smiling, a few frames where she spoke to another.

“You’re teasing me again... Of course you would. Now turn that off... I mean it... You never worry... I love you.”

Only her voice remained, the other voice erased, but Padmé didn’t need to hear the voice to remember the conversation.

*“You’re teasing me again.” He’d been teasing her unmercifully about something she had quickly forgotten.*

*“I would never do that.” He always teased.*

*“Of course you would. Now turn that off.”*

*“Relax. No one’ll see it.” That cocky grin he got on his lips, so smug in his belief that no one could crack whatever codes he’d put in it.*

*“I mean it.”*

*“You’re worrying again. It’s coded on playback. No one can see it unless I show them how to unscramble it.” She did worry and with good reason.*

*“You never worry.” Or at least it never looked as though he worried. He would charge off without a thought as to what would happen later.*

*“Yes I do.”*

*There was a pause, where she’d glanced down, and back up, then smiled gently. “I love you.”*

*"I love you too, Padmé. Don't doubt that. I'll always love you." He'd turned it off then and proceeded to prove his affections to her.*

The image began to replay. Padmé switched it off and tucked the device into her cloak. How long ago had Anakin been here? She hardly thought any other person would leave the device there. It had to be Anakin, assuming no one would know how to start the device after all the tinkering he'd done to it. But he'd once shown her how to start it.

Padmé left her flowers sitting beside that bouquet and went home to her cottage.

She spent the afternoon trying to rip out the ivy she'd planted. It was spreading almost faster than she could keep on top of it. She'd lost count of how many afternoons she'd spent ripping it out only to notice the stupid plant was growing in the same place a few days later.

Going inside, she got out her embroidery, intending on trying to stitch for a bit. So far, she pricked her fingers more than actually stitched and she was beginning to have fond memories of the painting she'd just decided she was hopeless at. At least with it, she could pretend she'd meant to use the ugly colors her paints had smeared into. She couldn't exactly claim the bloodstains on her embroidery was artistic license now could she?

With a long sigh, she noticed something green beside the window. What was that? She didn't recall anything green on the wall before. Getting back up, she crossed to it and leaned close.

Oh for—

Disgust turned her lips. It was that blasted ivy, grown *through* the foundation of the cottage.

Geez, she thought. It's like Jar-Jar. Get rid of it and it comes right back.

---

After several treatments, Anakin began to feel somewhat like his old self. He could look in a mirror and see himself beneath the scars. The surgeons were doing a marvelous job at reconstruction and if Palpatine ever wondered what Anakin was up to, he never said a word on it.

Anakin smiled at his reflection, then grimaced. Okay, so maybe he still had a very long way to go until he was back to his old handsome self. He took several long, slow breaths, and began the process of putting the hated black suit back on. The sooner he was out of it the better. He'd begun to wear it as a uniform as the treatments continued, something to put on in the morning — or when he was ordered to terrorize a rebel or something — and take off in the evenings.

The prognosis on his lungs had gotten slightly better. They'd now decided that a miracle could happen and he might someday be able to breath for hours at a time without needing a respirator. For now, he had strict orders not to go too long without the respirator.

For once, he followed orders to the letter. Anakin had never had a problem doing things his own way when he thought his way was better, but this was something he wanted almost as much as he'd wanted Padmé. He'd fixated on regaining his health as much as possible. A healing process. Becoming a new man.

Anakin pursued that end with a single mindedness that would have sent old Palpatine into a fit if he'd known about it. He smiled at the thought and finished getting dressed.

---

Palpatine felt a great disturbance in the Force and scowled. What was Anakin up to now? It was Anakin, too, and not Vader. Anakin was — *inconceivably* — taking back control of his body, trying to shove Vader aside. How was he doing it, because Palpatine had never considered him very strong of will before. Look how easily he'd caved in to the dark side. A few misleading suggestions, a murder or two and he was hooked. Not strong of will at all. Or was he?

He almost regretted making the boy kill all those Jedi. Now, he was stuck with him. He'd have to wait for a child to be born and grow before he could have a new apprentice. Anakin was getting on his nerves, always angsty over his dead wife and over the perfectly reasonable killing that needed done on a daily level.

How had he not seen that Anakin was so... Oh, what was the word he was looking for? Palpatine drummed his fingers on the arms of his chair, endeavoring to think of an appropriate word for his apprentice. Wishy-washy? No. Spineless? No. Naïve? No, he'd already known that Anakin was as naïve as they grew 'em at the Jedi Temple.

Immature. *That* was the word. How had Kenobi managed not to slap the boy? Now that Palpatine spent each day with him, he ruminated upon that, concluding that Kenobi was more patient than the Sith ever could be. Powerful or not, he should not have concentrated his efforts on Anakin, he saw that now. He *should* have concentrated on Kenobi. The Sith would have used Kenobi's patience. Kenobi would have made a wonderful Sith.

He imagined the bearded man as a Sith, slashing away at enemies with that cavalier attitude Kenobi and Anakin had appeared to share when they'd fought. Was it any wonder, Palpatine thought, that he had been blinded to the truth? Anakin had simply been outwardly a more appropriate choice, being the Chosen One and all. Really, he should have groomed Kenobi instead.

All that patience...

Ahh well, he thought, let us concentrate on what is, not what gloriously could have been.

What, seriously, was Anakin up to? He'd gone off to Naboo — again. Naboo of all places. Palpatine had thought the memories of the place would be too much for poor, emotional Anakin. Anakin had so many wonderful moments with his darling Padmé there.

Ugh. The sentimentality of it made him want to puke. A place was a place, nothing more. No one saw *him* crying over the things that had happened and the places they'd happened in.

Not to mention that Anakin was spending far too much time by himself for comfort. Alone and in total ascendance, with Vader too far below the surface. Anakin was still such a... *teenager* that he might get ideas if off alone, in the suit or not. His ideas could be dangerous. After all, his romance with Padmé was one of those ideas and look how *that* had turned out.

Anakin married with a pregnant wife...

Palpatine's brows v-ed into a frown. He'd better find something to bring Anakin back to Coruscant and quick. He couldn't have a repeat of the whole 'Padmé affair'. Not at this stage of his plans and there were too many nubile girls on Naboo for Anakin to fall for. Best to have him here.

## Chapter Three: Moving On

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Three: Moving On

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

Notes: Thank you so much for the reviews!

---

He liked his voice. Anakin hummed a little, trying it out for the thousandth time since his physician had given the okay for him to talk again.

It was amazing the sort of developments being made in cybernetics and organ replacements. He'd become something of a procedure junkie, reading up on the latest procedures in case his doctor had missed seeing something. He wanted to make sure he was fully informed about all options. Like this surgery he'd had on his throat. He now had the ability to talk without the mask on. It was great. His new voice barely sounded robotic. There was a twinge, but he didn't think anyone could hear it unless they were looking for it.

Of course, it wasn't as good as his old voice, but that couldn't be helped now could it? The technicians and surgeons had done what they could using the old vids Anakin had supplied them with. Who had known that those 'poster boy' times as Obi-Wan had called them would turn into something honestly useful?

He blinked, then blinked again, finally winking at himself in the mirror and grinning. Bolstered by the initial success of that operation, he'd immediately ordered the eye surgery as well... and had a huge mess to clean-up when his personal physician insisted he take time to recover from the throat surgery before undergoing another procedure and Vader had grown tired of arguing.

That surgery had gone well and he could see just fine without the mask.

Anakin sighed, moving across his quarters to sit on the couch. He had a new personal physician now; one fresh from school, with no preconceived notions of what being hired by a Sith Lord could mean for his present and future. He was a likeable fellow, eager to help Lord Vader improve his health and his suggestions, spoken in a soft tone, didn't even anger Vader too much. All in all, Anakin would have to say that he was pleased with his progress physically to date. The procedures brought him closer to what he had been, increasing his hold on his body, making it his again.

Vader was uneasy inside him, pleased by the physical changes only because he kept thinking of how he could have been had he not been injured by the lava. He would go on and on about how he should have won that duel. Considering how powerful they'd been then, Anakin concurred, but Vader had let over-confidence get in the way. He hadn't won, as Anakin constantly reminded him. He'd lost and put them in this health nightmare. Vader would quiet at that reminder; that implication that he'd been responsible for ruining their body. He was uneasy with Anakin's hold, plotting each moment to gain a foothold and shove Anakin back behind him once more.

Anakin wasn't going to let that happen. In fact, he was feeling very confident that he'd made tons of progress all the way around. *So confident*, that he'd begun really thinking about women, much like when he'd first begun to notice girls as a teen. He was ready to move on, to let Padmé go.

Unfortunately, now that he had deemed himself ready to move on, Anakin hadn't a single idea how to meet women. It wasn't exactly something ever covered in classes at the Temple and he was fairly certain that the rest of the women in his past — Padmé's handmaidens — would be fairly unforgiving of his past transgression of having throttled their former employer to death.

If only Padmé wasn't dead. He'd throw himself at her perfect feet and plead with her to forgive him. He wouldn't expect her to take him back or anything like that, not when he'd killed her, but he'd beg for forgiveness anyway. She was dead, though. Cold in a grave and gone, no matter how much he thought he felt her presence in certain places. He'd seen the holo of her funeral procession and gone to her grave. He'd looked at the stone and felt no end to his pain.

It was as though she was not there in the ground at all. He had no feeling of her there, like looking at a picture of a grave of an anonymous woman who had not been his wife.

He'd taken a bouquet of her favorite flowers, though in retrospect he supposed charging a bouquet that big on his Imperial expense account probably hadn't been such a good idea. Palpatine was surely going to ask why he'd bought flowers and the price of those hadn't exactly been cheap. Worth it, in his opinion, but certainly not cheap. It was the wrong time of year for them and they had to be grown in a greenhouse.

They'd looked really pretty at her grave. He didn't think Palpatine would appreciate that, not with him trying to erase Padmé from memory.

It also hadn't been a good idea to leave that picture there. What had he been thinking? He could almost slap himself for stupidity. Anakin sighed. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, a way to tell Padmé that he had loved her and he would continue to remember her even when he began dating other women.

Anakin knew he had a long way to go yet in his grieving process, but that didn't mean he couldn't *look*, did it? He wanted to look. He wanted to begin feeling again all those things he'd once felt. Padmé, his love, was gone and he could think about other women.

Another woman wouldn't have Padmé's personality or her smile or that adorable quirked brow she got when annoyed or... She wouldn't be Padmé. There would never be another woman like her, so he had to put away such expectations. He had to... lower the bar, so to

speak. So how did one go about meeting women? So far, his excursions into the bars hadn't done anything except make the patrons behave exceedingly well. People had a habit of stopping and staring when he was in the suit and he didn't have a good enough lung capacity yet to go out without the mask.

The nightclubs had been better, primarily because they were dark and he wasn't the only large hulk completely covered in black material. However, the mask was a big drawback. He couldn't take it off and talk to the women because of his lungs and whenever he spoke, his voice had that echoing quality that seemed to turn the women right off.

Not that many women talked to him. Oh, he could make them with a wave of his hand — and had as a teenager — but as a grown man wasn't that a bit like cheating? The only good part of the mask that he could see was that he could look all he liked without getting slapped down physically or verbally. He could look and look and look...

Anakin crossed his arms. What about a personal ad? Tarkin had been having wonderful luck with that ad he'd been running for weeks. In fact, Tarkin was telling him just that morning about the woman he'd met. She didn't mind that he worked with two Sith Lords and had a thing for men in uniform.

Maybe he could do that. Did the suit count as a uniform, he wondered.

Anakin settled down to write and couldn't think of a thing to say. It wasn't exactly appropriate to write, "Former Jedi gone bad seeking older woman with political experience, brown curled hair and strong opinions. Must like body armor, masks and silly, romantic conversation."

No, that wouldn't do at all. He'd simply have to come up with something different. Four days later, he had something he decided was suitable and sent it off to be published.

---

Padmé perused the 'who wanted who' ads, always amused by how desperate some people seemed to meet others. She'd always imagined the people who wrote those ads as being shy and socially inept or downright odd. These ads for example —

*'Imperial officer seeking female companion. Must like uniforms and be knowledgeable of archaic methods of torture. Only serious replies please.'*

*'Vertically challenged male seeking like female to share self-imposed isolation. Should enjoy fog, swamps and the simple life.'*

Padmé giggled softly to herself, then gasped at the sound of her own laughter. It had been so long since she'd laughed. Continuing to scan the ads, she finally noticed one much longer than the rest that stopped her laughter fully.

*'Wishing to meet a woman of similar interests to my own. I enjoy picnicking in meadows and the soothing sound of waterfalls; the scents of wildflowers and skin like silk beneath my fingertips. I adore flying and building droids and hate sand with a passion. Should any of these describe you as well, please let me know. I would be greatly interested in meeting you and am in darkness until that moment.'*

Her heart gave a lurch.



Ani.

She recognized the references, the flow of the words and could practically hear his voice in her mind. Padmé closed her eyes. It had to be him. It *had* to be. After a long moment of soul searching, she began to compose a letter.

---

Timtec Taytec hated making reports to the Emperor, but the accounting department had appointed him as their representative, so off he went to give the quarterly report. It should have been a relatively painless process, ‘should have’ being the operative words. Every quarter, he woke up to find himself in the infirmary with no memory of how he’d gotten there or of even giving the report. Not to mention how he couldn’t recall how he’d broken those bones.

Squaring his shoulders, he entered Emperor Palpatine’s office.

He had a bad feeling about this.

---

Palpatine stared at Vader’s expense account report and then at the man reporting it to him. What kind of idiots did he have working for him that they’d let something like this slip past for weeks? No, he squinted at the date. Not weeks. Months. Three months. They’d let this go on for three months before reporting to him about it.

Anakin was ordering flowers and not just any flowers, but the kind that were expensive and rare at the time he’d ordered them. That could only mean one thing.

There was a woman. Somewhere in the galaxy, there was a woman. He recognized the way Anakin was behaving and it pointed to a woman. The flowers, the evenings partaking in Coruscant’s wild night life. He shook his head in disgust, Force throwing the man who’d brought the report at the wall and letting him crumple unconscious to the floor.

Hadn’t Anakin already learned that lesson? Was he truly that naïve to believe a second affair would end better than the first?

Obviously he was if these annoying side trips to Naboo were any indication. And why Naboo anyway? Did he figure that one Naboo female had been stupid enough to fall in lust with a Jedi so there must be one willing to do so with a Sith?

Oh who knew *what* the boy was thinking!

No, Palpatine changed his mind. He did know what the boy was thinking, or rather thinking *with*. The same thing that had caused the whole ‘Padmé affair’. Really, he should have had the surgeons take care of that for good when they’d put the initial suit on Anakin, but even he couldn’t have foreseen the boy’s hormones would take over again. He’d *thought* the lava had fried all that out of him. He’d *thought* Anakin would mourn that meddlesome woman for life, effectively keeping him from spreading his genes across the galaxy, yet here he was, apparently *over* her, however ludicrous that seemed.

Palpatine put his chin in his hand. And wanting to date, his informants had told him. That he didn't understand. Dating. What woman compared to unlimited power? Anakin had had surgeons alter his appearance, as though it *mattered* that he looked like his old self. Wasn't the suit fearsome enough to engender fear? *He'd* certainly thought so. Was fear not good enough? Did Anakin *still* think being liked was important?

Who needed to be liked when the galaxy trembled at the sight of you?

This was a disaster. He could almost see what was going to happen. Anakin would find some woman who thought the suit was a turn on and manage to impregnate her. A disaster. Palpatine would, of course, have to have the woman and child killed and he'd *never* hear the end of Anakin's whining. Oh, he supposed he *could* take the child and raise it, but then he'd have to deal with a child. He hated children, especially babies, and had praised fate for years that none of the women he'd chosen as companions had ever had the slightest inclination towards that state of motherhood. Although, no one said he had to raise it himself. Perhaps a foster family would do?

He sighed, noticed the man on the floor was stirring and threw him across to the other wall. He should have groomed Kenobi. Kenobi wouldn't have given him this trouble. Kenobi wouldn't be running around Naboo and Coruscant like an idiot trying to spread his genes with the nearest willing female.

*Kenobi* would have been a better Sith.

---

"I don't want to wait."

"You have to. I'm not ready yet."

"I don't want to."

"Don't give me problems here, Ben. Keep your eyes closed. It's a surprise." Dormé cast a suspicious glance at her husband, who was so far keeping his eyes obediently closed. She'd bought a sexy little maternity nightgown from a consignment shop on Naboo and it had finally arrived, being among the items they'd picked up in town. Although, little didn't accurately describe it... Still, it was pretty and silky and completely impractical. Who, she wondered, would even try to sleep with pearls crossing over the arms?

"I don't like surprises. The last one I had about killed me."

"You'll like this one, now keep those eyes closed." Dormé straightened the panels, sliding a hand over the slate blue material. Such a pretty color. Blue in some light, lavender in others. Striking a pose, she said, "You can look now."

Obi-Wan opened his eyes, brow raising and lascivious smile turning his lips. "Well worth the interminable wait. You look..." He crossed to her. "Succulent."

"Succulent is for describing food." The answering shrug of his brows had her suddenly very warm. Dormé stretched her hands up to his face, running her fingers along the line of his jaw. "You are too bad for words, my love."

He put his arms around her, his expression faltering briefly before he kissed her. What was that about, she wondered.

---

The dress Dormé wore was very pretty, though he hoped she wasn't planning to sleep in it. Those pearls didn't look like they'd be very comfortable. The color suited her coloring though and he couldn't resist trying to make her blush.

Obi-Wan reached for her and had an image of Padmé leap into his mind. She was dressed in this very gown, with her hair down and a happy smile curving her lips.

Padmé? What the—

It's my imagination, he thought. It has to be. I do not sense Padmé right now.

But he did and it bothered him. He should not be thinking of Padmé right now of all times. He should be fully focused on his wife, not her best friend. Think Dormé, lovely, beautiful Dormé. You know, the one carrying your *baby*. He kissed Dormé and worked the dress from her as quickly as possible. With the dress gone, there were no more thoughts of Padmé. He sighed with relief and bent his attention to Dormé in full.

## Chapter Four: The Dance Begins

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Four: The Dance Begins

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

---

He was pleased to receive what seemed like a serious reply and waited, deliberately torturing himself in anticipation, until he had removed his suit to read it in full. Why? Because the suit was his work clothing. Here, in his quarters, he would have personal time. Personal time was ‘me’ time. On the clock, he was Darth Vader, terrifying minion to the Emperor, but on his own time, he shed that persona and became Anakin Skywalker.

Without the suit, he felt stronger, more like himself and less under sway of Vader’s suggestions. All day long, he had to put up with that sly one whispering ideas into his thoughts.

*Choke that guy, Anakin, he smirked at us wrong. Choke that one, too. Why? No reason. Okay, give me twenty seconds to glance at his personnel file and I’ll find a reason. Throw that guy across the room. How dare he not agree with us.*

It was exhausting. Vader was strong. Anakin couldn’t let up his vigilance for too long or else he had to fight for dominance once more and that particular fight took a lot out of him.

Showered, changed into loose clothing, and having the portable respirator and oxygen tank handy, Anakin settled down to read.

“Dear In Darkness—”

‘Dear In Darkness.’ He liked that. Polite and cordial. Off to a good start. He had a good feeling about this letter.

“—I saw your ad and felt compelled to reply. Please understand that I do not usually answer these ads, but your words struck a chord inside me and I knew I should write to you. I too enjoy picnicking in meadows, though it has been a very long time since I have done so. I have fond memories of such moments. As for waterfalls, they soothe me, too. In my life, I have spent long minutes sitting still with my eyes closed as that sound caresses my ears.

While I am a competent pilot, it’s more a duty than a pleasure to me and I cannot say I have ever built a droid. Adjusted a few to my personal specifications, yes. There was a time

when I didn't mind sand, but I can understand an aversion to it. I recently had the misfortune of living in an area that was rife with the stuff and it gets everywhere. It's impossible to keep a house properly clean when sand is constantly blowing in and being tracked in.

I lead a solitary life at present, working mostly on my hobbies. They are the typical hobbies attributed to a female on her own. I hope that does not disappoint you? I embroider, paint, garden and am interested in so many varied things that it might be easier if you tell me a little more about yourself. I honestly aren't sure what to write.

Hoping to hear from you soon,

Waiting”

Anakin smiled. Sounded good to him. Domestic. Now how old was she? A picture would be good too. He began to compose a letter in return, asking those questions. By the time he was ready to sleep, he thought he had a decent reply ready and set it aside to proof in the morning, before his appointment with his new psychiatrist.

His dreaming hours were thankfully free of too many nightmares and though he rose to Vader's whispering, he was able to push him back just by glancing at the letter. His hopes were high. Anakin dressed, ate breakfast, sent the letter and headed to his appointment. He hadn't had much luck in the psychiatric department. The doctors all tended to anger him, which had terrible consequences for them. But he was certain that wouldn't happen this morning. This doctor was new, recently graduated and arrived, and after having five meetings with him, Anakin thought this was the doctor for him. He nodded and listened and had said little so far. They got along fine.

Anakin greeted the receptionist and went right in. The appointment started off well, he thought. Relaxing in his chair, Anakin slowly brought the conversation around to the subject that was interesting him the most. “I think I'm ready to date,” he said.

The man started. “Date? Ready to date?” He shook his head, as though the statement was positively ludicrous. “Oh no, Lord Vader, it'll be a long while yet—”

“No it won't,” Anakin contradicted him. “I'm ready to date again.”

“No, Lord Vader, your emotions are still too raw on the subject of your wife.”

Had this guy been talking to the other doctors? He couldn't have, he reminded himself, because Vader disposed of them when they said things he didn't like.

*They all deserved it, Vader quipped now. Smug, self-important...*

Anakin could feel him stirring, waking up to where they were, and struggled to breath evenly. Stay calm, he told himself over and over. “My dead wife, doctor. She's dead. She's been dead for almost four years now—”

“And you're not in any shape emotionally to become romantically entangled with another woman.”

He frowned, trying valiantly to control the anger rising within him. Really, who does this man think he is? He doesn't...

*...know our feelings, now does he? Guesses, all guesses. He's wrong. He's just telling us this to control us. The same...*

...game as the others. Anakin shuddered briefly as his thoughts and Vader's coincided. I want to date. I don't want to wait. I want to date now.

The thought was stubborn in his mind. Now, now, *now*. He cleared his throat. "Yes, I am ready. I'm ready. I know I am."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you're not."

*Trying to control us, Vader said. Telling us what to do, how to live. Who is he to do this? How does he know what we're ready for?*

He gritted his teeth and took a deep breath. "Yes, I am." This time, he said it slowly, as though trying to make a child understand a concept.

The doctor — whose name still wouldn't come to him — returned the tone and infuriatingly, was better at it. "*No*, you're not. Lord Vader, you've admitted you still dream about her. You've told me your feelings when looking at her grave. You're not ready to date if you can't even accept the fact that your wife is there in the ground. Dead. 'D'— 'e'— 'a'—'d' — *dead*."

"I *know* she's dead. I said that. She's dead and buried. All I said, *doctor*, was that the grave didn't feel like hers. That's somewhat of a difference between acknowledging she's dead and ignoring the cold, hard fact of it. I mean, how can I possibly ignore that she isn't beside me in bed at night?" He shook his head. "The grave just doesn't feel like it's hers, like she isn't even in it—"

"Which indicates an unwillingness to let go of her. You say you know she's dead, yet you look at her grave and can't admit it's hers."

He could hear his own teeth grinding now. "I know she's dead. I know the grave is *supposed* to be hers..." Now he raised his hand, found himself thinking that it'd fit nicely around the man's throat, and forced himself to silently keep repeating his mantra to 'stay calm'. I'm not going to choke another doctor, he told himself sternly. You aren't either, he told Vader, which he was certain was being ignored, for the urge to just choke this man and be done with it kept rising.

"You are not to date or consider dating for a long while yet."

Anakin's anger rose sharply.

"In fact, I would recommend you don't date for at least a year after you can stand at your wife's grave and admit out loud that she is there in the ground dead."

A red haze slid over his vision and blackness took over.

A few minutes later, Anakin blinked, releasing his Force hold on the doctor's throat and lowering his hand. The man keeled over in his chair and crumpled dead onto the floor with a

soft ‘thump’.

Oops.

“Not again,” he murmured.

Inside his mind, Vader said, *Problem solved. Date away.*

Hmm. Maybe he should erase his name from the appointment calendar and suggest to the receptionist that he’d never been there. Yes, that might be best. Never mind that it might be beginning to look slightly suspicious that four — no five — doctors he’d seen had died from choking.

I can’t keep doing this, he decided as he cleaned up Vader’s mess as best he could and went on to his work day.

---

She’d dropped another stitch, hadn’t she?

Padmé cast a surreptitious glance at the other members of the craft club she’d joined in an effort to alleviate her boredom. So far, they’d put up with her through hand lace-making, rug hooking, spinning, pottery, and basket weaving.

The lace-making had cut off the circulation in her fingers. Rug hooking was okay, but more boring than a long Senate session when Palpatine was giving one of his famous speeches. Spinning hurt her thumbs and she’d never quite gotten the hang of keeping the wheel going at an even pace. The heat from the pottery kiln gave her too many nightmares of Mustafar and she was *still* picking out splinters from the basket weaving.

They had suggested knitting. She suspected they alternately pitied her inability to craft and wanted to strangle her for her ineptness. Padmé sighed. She just couldn’t find anything she really enjoyed doing. Her effort at painting had produced the ugliest landscapes and she’d decided she had absolutely no musical ability what so ever after the local music instructor burst into tears at one lesson and refused to answer the door at her next one.

Gardening was far too stressful and her feud with the ivy she’d been stupid enough to plant had already gained her more attention than she needed. Maybe, it was time to move on and try something like fishing or gourmet cooking. Sola was an excellent cook and their mother was good too, if the sort who tended to cook for quantity rather than quality on occasion.

“Mrs. Sky,” Lomi, the leader of the craft club and all around crafting wonder, called to her, “You’re dropping stitches like crazy, dear. Too many more and you won’t have anything on your needles to work with.”

Perhaps she should pretend she meant to do that? After all, she saw other women letting stitches go like that. Padmé tried to salvage the mess she was making. “Yes, it looks pretty that way.”

There were horrified gasps from around her and she decided knitting wasn’t for her either. She needed something that it didn’t matter if she messed up.

Lomi frowned. “I see, dear. Aren’t you following the directions for your project though? It might not turn out if you don’t.”

“I decided to wing it.”

This confession brought more gasps. Lomi gave them all a stern glance and returned a smile to Padmé. “Maybe you’d like beading a bit better. More room for imagination.” She’d done her best to find Padmé a craft she could do and must be feeling the pressure after so many failures.

“Actually, I tried jewelry making first. You wouldn’t believe how many beads I lost. They were everywhere. I’m still finding beads on the floor.” She smiled and laughed, as though it didn’t matter and she was some carefree ditz.

They all laughed and tried to put her at ease over that particular failure, but she could see what many of them were thinking. It was all over their faces.

*Poor girl. She really is hopeless if she can’t even string beads on wire or thread.*

“Yeah, I think I’m going to try fishing or gourmet cooking next.”

Lomi seemed relieved. “Good luck with that, dear. We’ll be rooting for you.”

---

Dormé perused the catalog. So many pretty clothes from this estate! Her favorite consignment shop had bought several lots and it seemed the woman who’d died had been quite the clothes horse. She wished she could buy them all, but as she had an immediate need for maternity clothes, she’d buy those outright and see if the shop would hold other items for her. She’d been a good customer over the years and maybe, just maybe, they’d take that into account.

Ooh, look at that cloak! A pretty burgundy color and the cutwork and embroidery were lovely. She squinted at the picture. Hmm. It looked as though whole sections of the embroidery had been picked away. No matter, she decided with a shrug. Re-embroidering would give her something to do in the afternoons.

Oh and that one too! Green with a purple sash! She noticed the burn-out designs on the velvet were not uniform, like they had been altered by someone not certain of what they were doing. Well, that was easy enough to remedy. It was a good thing she’d bought that burn-out kit awhile back. She smiled. And Ben had asked her if she was actually going to play with that kit. Silly man. He should have realized why she’d bought the kit when those thirty yards of turquoise velvet had arrived, but he hadn’t and when this green velvet arrived, she’d put that kit to good use.

Dormé’s first impulse was to buy the cloaks, but then she glanced around her home and knew they’d be completely out of place. Maybe she shouldn’t buy them. She’d swelter in those cloaks. Of course, she was sweltering in just about everything these days. Pregnancy had completely thrown off her internal temperature. She’d gone from being cold all the time to being hot all the time. Ben kept telling her to just go naked; he wouldn’t mind. But what if someone actually came out to visit them? That could get awkward.



She forced herself to thumb past the luxurious velvet cloaks and elaborate dresses and focus on the simpler items. No velvet. She told herself to think of everyday dresses and tunics and nightdresses. She ordered three pairs of comfortable looking pants in the nice beige tones everyone on Tatooine wore and three tunics that would be interchangeable with the pants. One brown tunic was sleeveless — very practical — and had a harness with it that was supposed to give back support, or belly support, or... *something*. The description wasn't clear. Best of all, it was marked down a lot in price due to the harness clasp, decorative pin and gauntlets being missing.

She cast a glance at her ever expanding waistline and thought it wouldn't be too long before she'd have a chance to try out that harness.

With a glance behind her, then right and left, she went back to the cloaks and ordered the two she liked best.

Moving on to the nightgown section, Dormé sighed upon seeing the first new gown. Now *that* was a beautiful gown. She really liked the pretty aqua color, not to mention the whimsical touch the tiny shells brought. Dormé pursed her lips. The embroidery on this one had been completely picked out, leaving tiny holes in the fabric. Bizarre. Why would anyone go to such trouble? She looked at the price. It was more than she was willing to pay even in the condition it was in, but maybe she could sell the detached sleeves and cape train thing and gain back the funds. Neither the train or cape was practical for Tatooine, though it could get cold at night.

Who am I kidding, she thought. Cold? With the baby inside and Ben beside me? That man is my own personal heat source at night. I don't *get* cold anymore.

Her attention remained on the gown, then the price. It could get snapped up if she waited. Dormé bit her lip, thinking. Should she buy it? It was pretty. Ben would like seeing her in it. It took her only a few seconds to make a decision, fingers tapping, concluding the transaction. Then, she began a letter to the owner. She had to know if there were more clothes available from that particular estate that weren't in the catalog yet. Whoever that woman had been, she'd had excellent taste in clothing. A smile curved her lips as she pictured her husband's pleased reaction to seeing her in some of those clothes.

He was going to love this.

## Chapter Five: Insight

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Five: Insight

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

---

Fishing was soooo relaxing.

Padmé adjusted the pillows behind her head and propped a foot on the side of the boat. She'd been fishing for twenty whole minutes now and was as relaxed as she could get. Reaching down beside her, she lifted her travel mug and took a dainty sip, grimacing slightly at the taste of the ale.

She wasn't much of a drinker and didn't really care for alcohol at all, but the man in the fishing supply shop had told her all the really serious fisherman drank ale. Of course he'd only told her that after spending ten minutes telling her how stupid she'd been to plant ivy. Unfortunately, it wasn't looking like the story of her war with the ivy was going to die down. Indeed, it appeared to be gaining speed. With any luck, something would happen soon to someone else that would eclipse her war with the ivy.

She'd decided she was going to be a real fisherman and drink ale. Go all out. Give it her best. A real fisherman. Well, aside from all that cleaning and gutting stuff. She'd be sporting and just catch them and then...

Oh my, she thought, smothering a yawn. I'm getting sleepy. Maybe I'll close my eyes for a minute.

An hour later, she was rudely awakened to the sensation of floating in water. She was floating. The boat had sprung a leak and was sinking.

With a roll of her eyes, Padmé left her supplies to the fishes and swam for shore.

---

"Lord Vader, you have an anger problem."

Under the cover of his mask, Anakin rolled his eyes. Yeah, that's obvious. Where did this loser get *his* degree from? But, he didn't seem interested in getting Anakin to talking about his childhood, his mother, Padmé, or how he felt when looking at Padmé's grave, so that was

a good thing. This man had arrived right after his last doctor died and was the only one left who'd consent to treat him. All the others claimed they had a full load of patients already.

"What you need is to learn how to work through your rages in a healthy manner."

*Healthy manner, Vader snorted. Choking people who annoy us isn't a healthy expression of our ire towards them?*

He sighed and tamped down Vader for the fifth time that morning. No, he told Vader. Choking people isn't a particularly good idea.

*Look on the bright side, Anakin. We have it down to a minute maximum for death. That must be some kind of record. Maybe not the sort recorded in the Galactic Book of Records, but one to be proud of...*

No, no, no. Anakin grimaced. Vader was hard to ignore this morning. Maybe he shouldn't have skipped breakfast to save time. He always was grouchy in the mornings. Not to mention the lack of reply from his mystery woman was beginning to fray his nerves. He'd sent her five letters and received four replies. The wait for a reply to his last letter was interminable. Had she decided not to write to him after all? Had he been too pushy in again asking for a picture? Or maybe he'd scared her off with his enthusiastic questions about her hobbies? Was he coming on too strong? Or not strong enough? Was five letters in two weeks too much? Or too little? Maybe he should write to her every day.

"I have just what you need, Lord Vader." The doctor pushed a datapad across the desk. "Take a look."

There was a schedule on the screen, dates one week apart stretching for three months. Anakin frowned. "Explain."

"You are in luck. We have one opening left. Our anger management classes are quite popular. We teach basic control techniques—"

Basic? Didn't he need something a little more extensive? After all, he *was* good at losing control. Didn't he need an advanced class or something? "Basic," he asked.

"Just fill out the form and show up. We'll teach you all you need to know."

All? Well, that sounded good. Maybe he'd sign up as Anakin now that he was breathing better. They finished the session by discussing the complete imbeciles he had to work with and Anakin left feeling much better. He didn't even have the impulse to choke anyone until after dinner.

Reaching his quarters, he was delighted to find a letter waiting. Anakin again tortured himself, taking a leisured shower and eating a light snack before settling down to read.

"Dear In Darkness,

I know my reluctance to speak face to face or share a picture of myself must be frustrating for you. You, though, have not exactly been forthcoming of your appearance either except to mention that you bear physical scars from your job. I am curious of you as well. Are you blond or dark haired? What color are your eyes? These are things I wish to know.

As for myself, I shall give you a description if you shall return the favor in your reply. I am small of stature, petite of frame and while I am not excessively curvy, neither am I without curves. I make time for exercise daily so I am toned and trim. I have a healthy tan from the time I spend outdoors, and my hair and eyes are brown. I have been called attractive. Does that suffice for now, my enquiring suitor? Or have I merely increased your thirst? I fear I am not good at looking in a mirror and describing myself.”

Anakin sighed and closed his eyes. Why wouldn’t she send a picture? She wouldn’t explain her reluctance, dancing about the issue. Oh, who am I to talk, he told himself. I do exactly the same thing.

“Thank you for your continuing interest in my many varied hobbies. Yes, my garden is growing well. Like a weed, some would say. I try to work in it every day and sometimes will spend an entire afternoon tending the yard. Such fun I have! No, the fishing didn’t turn out to be a good idea after all. I’d barely started when my boat sprung a leak and I ended up having to swim for shore. I lost all of my equipment and fervently hope the fish are enjoying it all. As for my other hobbies, I’m making progress on several projects and have discovered that not even the local wildlife will eat my cooking mistakes and they’ll eat anything. I’m afraid that as a gourmet cook I’m a great debater.”

He thought that over a minute. Unfortunately, the mention of debating brought forth images of Padmé and he vowed to ask what, if any, political experience Waiting had. Then he thought on it some more and wondered who had done the cooking when she was married if she wasn’t very good at it? Had her husband cooked? Or had either of them had the sort of income to allow for help? Another question he might ask later when he knew her better.

“But, practice makes perfect, as I am well aware. Some day I will make a palatable stew. Until then, I suppose I’ll eat cheese and crackers and anything already made up. This cooking stuff is harder than my mother makes it look”

Ah-hah! Her mother was still alive. Anakin smiled. He’d learned something new about her.

“Now tell me, what is it you do exactly? I’m always interested in the jobs others hold, but I’m afraid you’d find my job history tedious and boring. I began my career in the field of public relations, then had a desk job for years that was quite frustrating and stressful most days. Sometimes, I thought I’d never accomplish a single thing. I was forced into early retirement, but don’t let that scare you. I’m only in my thirties. It was a downsizing matter. I simply wasn’t needed anymore.

I can’t wait to read your reply.

Affectionately, W.”

He considered the question she’d posed to him with all seriousness. How could he explain without *explaining* what he did? It really wasn’t the thing to tell her he was Darth Vader, henchman to the Emperor and pet apprentice. That might really scare her off. Well, unless she was like all the women that kept replying to Tarkin’s ad. Anakin was amazed how many freaks there were in the galaxy who found Imperial uniforms sexy. Tarkin could barely schedule them all into his evenings.

After several tries, he had a reply that he thought skirted the issue nicely.

“Dear Waiting,

You asked what I do and the answer is a simple one. I work for the empire. What more can be said of that? I have a job I’ve come to despise that has brought me more grief than joy from the outset. This position lost me things and people dear to me, for who remains near the empire if they do not have to?

Your response, I will anticipate to that, is why not quit and leave it all behind? Why not go away somewhere? Well, it’s a bit complicated. I can’t simply leave no matter how I now wish it so. I am stuck here and see no way out of it. When I think of spending the next ten, twenty, thirty years of my life here, I can’t breathe. I feel claustrophobic, trapped by my own decisions.

Not many people would fully understand a living hell of one’s own making, but that is where I am. For example, I was married once, with a child on the way. I made a decision I thought was good for our future and it was disastrous. I’d made the decision in a moment of weakness and lost both of them as consequence. A hell of my making and I live with that every day.

So you see, Waiting, I am a damaged man and somewhat bitter about my past transgression. Still, I am changed from the man I was then and I do hope for the better. I will not continue as I was. I must become new, reborn from ashes.

Yours, ID”

Okay, maybe he sounded a little creepy, but was it too much? The whole ‘reborn from ashes’ line smacked of gallows humor, considering how he’d ended up on Mustafar. Before he could second guess himself, he sent the letter, and spent the next three days in agony until her reply arrived.

“Dear In Darkness,

I sympathize with the loss of your family, for I too lost a child. Two children, actually. The pain of that is tremendous. We share that, you and I.

As for your job, you are correct in my question. Why not leave? If it is killing you — and it sounds as though it is stifling the life from you — then you should turn from it before it destroys you completely. Consider this — there is responsibility and there is sheer unapologetic stupidity. You wrote that you are stuck there, that it is complicated and you can’t leave though you want to. Ask yourself why you are stuck? What are those specific complications? What is it exactly that keeps you chained to a job you despise?

Responsibility is making decisions for your life and accepting the consequences of your choices without blaming others. It’s making a living. It’s doing things you don’t always want to do, but are necessary. *However*, stupidity is doing the above when it harms yourself and those around you. It’s self-destructive and if you are truly wishing to ‘be reborn’ then you must leave that job to save yourself.

From what you have told me, staying there is stupidity. Get out of there before it really is too late. You’re a good man. Don’t stay there.

Affectionately, W.”

Her reply stung more than a little. It was as though she knew all the things he'd done; from the younglings, to Padmé and beyond.

*Stupidity is doing the above when it harms yourself and those around you. It's self-destructive and if you are truly wishing to 'be reborn' then you must leave that job to save yourself.*

She was right and he knew it; *had* known it. Still, it stung to have it come from another person. He'd made a misguided attempt at responsibility and ended up wallowing in her definition of stupidity.

Ouch.

He could not remain Palpatine's apprentice, for Palpatine was the reason he was stuck there. Kill Palpatine and his problem was solved. He could leave. Killing Palpatine would also end much evil in the galaxy. He no longer had doubts that Palpatine was evil.

*Kill Palpatine. Vader stirred. That's a tall order, Anakin. He's kept us too occupied in other areas to make a decent attempt on his life. I'm willing to try though. Have you a plan?*

He ignored the voice, staring at the letter.

She called him a good man. Did she know him well enough through these few letters to make such a judgment? And if he was a good man, was it his duty to rid the galaxy of Palpatine's brand of evil?

Anakin wept.

---

I am the worst husband in the galaxy, Obi-Wan thought, slugging down the drink Dormé had brought him. She had loads of new clothes she was trying to model for him and all he could think of was Padmé. Padmé here, Padmé there. He put a hand to his temple and rubbed. For the first few minutes of this impromptu fashion show, he'd been quite enthusiastic about Dormé's clothes. She loved clothes and he loved having her happy. Or rather, she loved *shopping*, and he loved having her happy. But then one piece brought back a memory and from there on, he'd been imagining Padmé.

The really perplexing thing about it was that the imaginings weren't the romantic sort. Well, except the ones he had when Dormé had on that nightgown with the pearls. Those images embarrassed him. He always saw a happy, smiling Padmé then, that smile teasing and flirtatious. No, the rest of the imaginings were heaped with sadness, as though there was nothing else in the world. Indeed, in the *galaxy*.

Which wasn't Dormé's intention. She'd bought these clothes in part to please him. He knew that, but Obi-Wan couldn't be enthused about them. He was too distressed by his continuing imaginings of Padmé. Why was he seeing her all the time in his mind?

I really am the worst husband in the galaxy. My beautiful wife is having our child and here I am thinking of her best friend. It's not right. Get a grip on yourself, Kenobi. He shook his head. Was it possible the clothes had been Padmé's? Maybe, he thought. Her family was on Naboo and they would be in charge of her personal effects. Dormé *did* shop at a store on

Naboo. That was a possibility and it would explain why there was a sense of familiarity to several of the pieces.

He watched his wife through the doorway as she changed back into what she'd been wearing earlier that day. Did it even matter if the clothes had been Padmé's? Really? No, he told himself. What matters is that Dormé is happy. You are not the worst husband in the galaxy and you will ignore those strange imaginings. They are nothing. That's final.

Course of action decided upon, he smiled as Dormé emerged from their bedroom holding a silky, next to nothing slip of fabric against her.

"Okay, Ben. Now imagine me wearing this in a few months, when it will actually fit over my belly." She struck a pose, her arms held out and up, the fabric slithering to one side, leaving her growing belly uncovered. Dormé frowned and tugged it back, then tried to strike the pose again. Again, the fabric slipped to the side. "Hmm. This isn't working. Come here and hold it in place, will you?"

He got up from his seat and walked over to her, holding the fabric as directed. It was easy to imagine her in this slip of nothing, stretched out on their bed with her hair long and loose. Releasing the fabric, he cupped her face and pressed a long kiss to her mouth.

"What was that for?" She tossed the gown onto the nearest chair.

"You are the most beautiful woman in the galaxy." The comment made her blush. He loved that he could make her blush without even trying.

"You're teasing me." One hand pushed her hair from her face. It had long ago escaped the braid she'd put it in and he liked it like this, slightly messy. Disheveled.

"I would never tease you, my love."

"Liar," she said, but the remark ended with a smile and a twinkle in her eyes. "Do you like the clothes?"

"Some of them. Others I'm not crazy about."

"Which ones? I can return them."

Obi-Wan ran a hand through her hair, enjoying the texture, the sensation. "It doesn't matter if I like them. If you like them, then keep them. *I* am not the one who'll be wearing them." He embraced her.

Dormé straightened his tunic. "You'd look pretty silly in them, that's for sure." Leaning close, she rested her head to his shoulder. Her hand slipped inside his tunic to rub at his chest. "I'm hungry. What's say we have an early supper?"

"We just had lunch an hour ago, before you began trying on that mountain of clothes."

"Oh." Dormé pulled back. Her smile faded away. She touched her belly, smoothed a hand over it and tried to tug her shirt down over it. The hem scooted up as soon as she let go of it. "Only an hour? I could've sworn it was later. I'm dying of hunger here."

Not only had she become hot all the time, she was hungry all the time, constantly nibbling on something. She'd jokingly referred to it as grazing like a shaak, but he'd noticed the tears

starting to come whenever she tried to make a joke about it anymore. Nothing he said could convince her she wasn't huge. "We'll picnic," he told her. "Spread out food on a blanket and sit on the floor. I'll read to you. Something fun."

She cast a glance at the floor. "I might not be able to get back up."

"Now you're jesting, Dormé. You're spryer than I am." That held truth. She claimed to be lumbering and slow, though that was far from the truth. Actually, the only thing different about her to look at her was the bit of belly she had now. She still moved with her usual lithe grace and had nowhere near the waddle she claimed. If she wore a structured top of some kind instead of the stretchy shirts she favored, it wouldn't be obvious she was even pregnant. "We'll picnic and that's final."



## Chapter Six: Personal Revelations

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Six: Personal Revelations

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

---

*What have you done that is so terrible?*

Considering the question his lovely mystery woman had posed in her last letter, Anakin stalked about the ship with as much arrogant swagger as he could manage. The walk kept all but the foolhardy from bothering him — a little trick he'd lifted from Vader. The legs Palpatine had chosen actually made it easier, as he ended up walking a little odd from them to begin with because they pinched where they joined to his thighs. They always had and doctors told him that couldn't be fixed without completely replacing the limbs. Why? Because of how soon Palpatine had wanted him up and about. There *should* have been a slow recovery period. After all, they'd replaced two legs and an arm, but there hadn't been enough of a recovery. Palpatine had wanted him out putting terror into the hearts of anyone who might object to Palpatine's rule of the galaxy. Skin and prosthetics had grown together in such a way that there was always going to be an uncomfortable pinching, so unless Anakin could figure out a way to con Palpatine into letting them be upgraded, he was stuck with the pain.

No wonder Vader was always in a bad temper, Anakin thought. Palpatine didn't want his pet apprentice to get too comfortable in any way. It was sort of like what Master Yoda used to say about the path to the dark side, only in this case, it was 'chafing led to discomfort; discomfort led to irritation, irritation led to anger...' and so forth. All the way to striking out at others because he felt bad physically.

Anakin lived with the pain though. He supposed he could fly along fully medicated and let 'better living through modern chemistry' be his motto, but the pain reminded him that he was in control of his mind and body once more, not Vader. He accepted it. Besides, if he was medicated too much, he might let Vader slip free and that could be disastrous.

Speaking of pain... Her question. What *had* he done that was so terrible?

Sensing Anakin's pensive turn, Vader eagerly awoke, rushing forward in his thoughts. *Nothing at all*, came that one's reply. *You've done nothing, Anakin. You made choices, very understandable ones under the circumstances.*

He ignored the silken voice, tallying off events to himself. He'd killed the children, then helped wipe out his friends and colleagues. After that, he'd killed rebels, ordered the death of a Naboo queen, killed more rebels and begun offing anyone that annoyed him too much. Oh, and during that time, he'd also managed to murder his wife and unborn child and try to kill his best friend and Jedi Master. Quite a list and it was much longer after four years.

*Impressive. You should be proud of how well you've served our Master and the empire.*

Anakin frowned, annoyance prickling at him even as he felt that surging of pride Vader mentioned. What was so great about the empire, anyway, he asked both himself and Vader. Order kept through fear, devastating recessions on some worlds due to changes in economy, forced military service for young men of a certain height, torture for anyone expressing a dissenting opinion, the enslavement of non-human species, and medical services now substandard because Palpatine didn't want to pay for the good service anymore. Unless it was for himself. Then he had the very best. The rest of the galaxy could rot.

*You misunderstand, Vader argued.*

Misunderstand? How could I misunderstand that? Look at us, Vader. Really look, because we're not exactly a picture of glowing health, now are we?

*We're breathing, aren't we?*

Barely, he retorted. It's your fault too. If you hadn't been so overconfident, we wouldn't have ended up breathing in all that junk on Mustafar and scarring our lungs like this.

*Like you aren't overconfident yourself? Who was it that rushed Dooku on Geonosis and got his arm chopped off? Wasn't me.*

Well it wasn't me that jumped over Obi-Wan and lost us two legs and the other arm, now was it? Huh, huh, huh? So there.

Anakin stopped walking, laughing a little to realize he was arguing with himself over things they both knew as truth. There were no misunderstandings, they were both overconfident and both of them had contributed to the state of their body. Then he laughed again, startling two officers walking by him.

I'm nuts, he thought. Thinking of myself as 'you', 'our', 'we' and 'they'; like I'm two individuals.

Shaking his head, he continued his tour of the ship, with no real destination in mind. He wondered on his own gullibility. Palpatine had lied to him. Blatantly and several times as well. Had he been so desperate to believe many of those lies? Or had he been weak enough of mind that Palpatine had controlled him as he had the Senate?

No, if that were true, wouldn't he still be obeying with few questions? He *had* been manipulated, but not through mind tricks, merely simple lies. He snorted. As though any lie was simple. Perhaps at the onset a lie seemed simple, yet one lie grew into two and snowballed until a person was mired in the resulting complex weaving.

Palpatine did not know how to save anyone from death. One more lie told to reel Anakin in. Palpatine had done everything he could to lure Anakin and to keep his own life and power base. To answer his question, Anakin decided that yes, he *had* been that desperate. He'd

believed dreams as inevitable, dreams that he saw now probably would not have come true after all. Padmé had died, but it hadn't been childbirth that killed her. It had been him.

Anakin shifted uncomfortably as he let himself into his quarters, pushing himself further in his thoughts, not letting himself ignore truth. Vader waited inside him, looking for any crack to force open and gain a foothold. He had to push himself or Vader would always have hold over him. I can't be afraid of my own thoughts, Anakin repeated over and over until the discomfort passed. Then, he continued his thought processes.

He'd listened to the silken promises of an evil man and taken them to heart, seduced by flattery and that tease of having an easy way to gain... not Padmé's safety, he saw now, but *power*. He'd wanted power. Maybe not the responsibility that went with power, but power all the same. A grimace tightened his lips. Palpatine had known it and so had the Jedi Council. He'd been ambitious in the wrong ways. He should have listened to Obi-Wan.

*That one? You're kidding right, Anakin? Obi-Wan held us back in everything. He was jealous from day one of our abilities.*

There were many things he should have done. Anakin sat down and removed Vader's helmet. He drew in several slow breaths. That was enough soul searching at present. He was too tired to continue right then.

---

They were all idiots, every last one of them.

Padmé stared at the Senatorial proceedings with irritation growing fast inside her. The only ones with any sense were Mon Mothma, Bail and a couple others, but it didn't look like any of them were present. At least, she hadn't glimpsed them. She sighed. She may be technically considered dead, but she still had to live here. These ideas they were bantering about were unacceptable and she was going to tell them that.

I'll write my Senator, she thought. He'll get a what's for on *this* issue.

Between her continued attempts at her hobbies, those letters to Anakin and sending in letters to the Naboo Senators and to various political magazines, Padmé was managing to fill up her days nicely. She had to watch hours of sometimes badly flickering Senatorial proceedings to keep on top of things and even if she wasn't making a difference, she was making herself feel like she was acting instead of hiding out on Naboo.

And then there were Dormé's letters. She'd been clothes shopping again and Padmé wondered how Obi-Wan was taking that. There had been a time when he'd objected to the small amount of items she and Dormé had brought when they'd gone to stay with him. Apparently, he was fine with Dormé's shopping.

Whenever Padmé had gone to the shops for meetings with her seamstress, she'd preferred to take Dormé, as her friend had thoroughly enjoyed the chance to browse the racks of fabric and see new designs. Had Dormé dragged Obi-Wan into a shop on Tatooine? Or was she shopping her favorite stores again, ordering from there and having them shipped?

She switched off the proceedings and went into the kitchen, taking a minute to look at her latest recipe and deciding she wasn't ready to start it yet. There was always tomorrow.

Grabbing some crackers and cheese, she returned to her living area. None of the projects there grabbed her interest and she sighed, nibbling on the snack. What could she do that might hold her interest?

Ah-hah! I haven't tried metal working yet!

Smiling now, Padmé finished her snack and readied herself for a trip in to town. With any luck she'd be working with metal by tomorrow afternoon. She had a good feeling about this idea.

---

Grudgingly, Palpatine gave in on the issue of new cybernetic limbs for Vader. He had the feeling that it was Vader and not Anakin that wanted them and if he had to spend a little to give Vader incentive to pop back out, then so be it. Keep Vader happy every now and then and Anakin would begin to throw tantrums. He knew how good Anakin's tantrums would be for Vader.

He didn't have any real problems with his apprentice's job performance. Although in obvious ascendance, Anakin was doing Vader's work. That was a good thing. The problem he did have, however, was that Anakin was beginning to take the suit off and walk around calling himself Anakin. Why, he'd heard several employees remark what a likeable fellow that new guy Anakin was. None of them could remember what department he worked in, but was he ever personable!

Palpatine shook his head. Misguided and horrible. Ahh, to have an upright apprentice that would stay the way he was supposed to!

Once more, he daydreamed of having Obi-Wan Kenobi as his apprentice.

---

Aromatherapy wasn't working. Flowers and herbs reminded Anakin of Padmé and the food scents kept making him hungry. Anakin's temples throbbed as he tried to pay attention to what his doctor was telling him. It was difficult to concentrate, especially when Vader wouldn't shut up.

*We don't need to be here, Anakin. We're perfectly healthy. We have new legs thanks to that argument we gave our Master about being a more effective Sith Lord with better ease of movement — not that you're performing my job to the best of our abilities, but I understand. You're in pain over Padmé and our mother. Why don't you relax and let me have just a few minutes? You can rest your aching head and not have to think about...*

Shut up already, he told Vader, frowning when the voice in his mind ignored the order.

"Two new things, Lord Vader. These techniques are well known and I believe that, along with your daily meditations..." The man paused. "You *are* still meditating, correct?"

Anakin nodded. "Of course." No need to mention that he had trouble stilling his mind and concentrating on the Force while Vader kept up a running commentary, was there?

“What position are you favoring these days? Have you tried sitting cross-legged on the floor?”

Vader quieted a moment, then asked Anakin in a cold voice, *he is joking, right? Thinks he's being funny?*

No, I don't think so, Vader. He's serious.

*Ignorance like that should be squashed before it can find a mate and reproduce. Our legs, the real, flesh and bone part, would ache in that position even with the new cybernetics. He's a doctor. He should know that.*

Anakin didn't bother pointing out that this man wasn't that sort of doctor. He was a shrink. He dealt with the mental/emotional things, not the body. Vader wouldn't listen even if he *did* point it out, so he didn't bother.

*Let me choke him. It'll only take a minute and then we wouldn't have to sit in that ridiculous anger management class anymore. Do you have any idea how annoying and whiny all our classmates are? 'Ooh, my boss yelled at me today.' Suck it up sweetheart. I get yelled at by Palpatine all the time and it never bothers me. I am a picture of calm.*

Vader's irritation was rising, belying that claim of calm, witnessed by the urge to raise his hand and focus on the doctor's throat. The exact reason he needed the class. So far, he hadn't regretted signing up as himself. Anakin told his doctor, “I've tried all sorts of positions. I *have* been meditating since I was a child, you know.”

He recalled Obi-Wan teaching him that first thing, before they'd even returned to the Temple, and his own impatience with the process. How many ten year olds that weren't raised by the Jedi would sit still more than a couple of minutes at a time? Obi-Wan had frequently said in a dry tone, ‘You are *always* on the move, Anakin. Even while resting.’ Later, he'd shortened it to simply, ‘Always on the move’, a gentle, affectionate tease.

“Oh yes. Then let's move on. I believe these new techniques will bring much success to this process, though I do want you to enroll in Anger Management when it's offered next. The class being full does not excuse you from the necessity of it, Lord Vader. You need to face your pain and anger and not shy away from it.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Take a look at these.”

The brochures piqued his interest and Anakin listened carefully as a new plan for treatment was outlined.

---

Vader's medical file was growing by the day it seemed. Palpatine leafed through the latest pages, noting how he could best sabotage the doctor's efforts and Anakin's progress. This would work much quicker if Vader would actually help instead of sitting there inside Anakin doing nothing. But oh, no, he was letting Palpatine do all the work. *As usual.*

He sighed, glancing at the list. Music therapy huh? With a small thoughtful smile, he pulled out the season schedule for the opera house and perused it. Wonderful. They were

performing tragedies all season. Tragedies were good music for a Sith. No nauseating happiness anywhere on the stage. A cackle left his throat as he mused upon Anakin's reaction.

The boy had been the usual young man in regards to music, eschewing anything he considered for old people. Like opera.

He jotted down a note. *Have an order sent to Vader to meet me at the opera house two days from now for the evening performance.* There, that should do nicely.

---

*Can't he get one of his aides to sit here and be bored with him? Why do we have to be here?*

Shush, Anakin told Vader. I'm trying to listen. Doc says music is good for us. It's therapeutic.

After several more tries to get Anakin to rebel, Vader went silent. Frustration swelled inside Anakin as the music continued. A soprano hit a high note and pretended to die on stage. She didn't do too badly either. All that was missing was a good amount of blood. Then came low, somber notes, the other actors laying her on a stretcher and carrying her about while they sang something about gods carrying her to her final resting place. Nice slow intricate weavings of instruments and voice.

Anakin and Vader both perked up, their thoughts coinciding without even one shudder on Anakin's part. They were in agreement. Now this—

*...is music I can...*

*...enjoy. It's passionate and full of...*

*...emotion and it speaks...*

*...to me.*

Anakin and Vader settled back into the seat and watched the drama unfold on stage, head tilted as they listened with rapt attention and full appreciation of the choral pieces.

Doc had such a good idea with this, Anakin thought. I'll have to thank him.

## Chapter Seven: Progress?

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Seven: Progress?

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

---

Padmé settled down to write. The metalworking hadn't been a good idea, so she was at loose ends at present. She'd decided to write a novel. Surely that couldn't be *too* difficult. She began with a brief outline of the plot. A romance would be good, she decided. Maybe she could eventually have something decent enough for publication, not to mention she could use personal experiences in the story.

Writing occupied her for many days, but she couldn't seem to stick with her outline. No, she kept writing scenes here and there and trying to stick them approximately where they needed to go. Then there was the little matter of the death scenes. She'd written about ten different death scenes for the heroine and three for the hero. Romances weren't supposed to have death scenes, were they? She'd never really read too many romances, not like Sola had, but by definition Padmé didn't think death scenes were allowed.

Perhaps she'd make the story an adventure. ID, or Ani, as she was certain it was him by now, had expressed an interest in her writing, so she sent him an outline and a sample of her first chapter. Well, the fifth version of it anyway. He returned it with several enthusiastic ideas of where she could take the plot. He suggested having the hero and heroine kidnapped and forced to fight animals to survive — all for the entertainment of their captors. Or maybe the heroine could be marked for assassination and the hero could protect her.

Padmé abandoned the idea of writing a full novel. All her ideas were too close to home. It was said to 'write what you know' but this was ridiculous. She couldn't do it. Her story ideas all ended tragically. Still, she found she could write a good romance up to a certain point of plot, so she concentrated on that. The build-up. Sexual tension. Then the sex. And more tension and more...

---

Boy, that 'Waiting' sure could write! Anakin sat down with her latest short story. She'd moved on from the idea of a novel and settled in to writing pretty steamy erotica. What a gift!

Who cared if she didn't know how to write a happy ending? She could write erotica that didn't read like a manual.

His dreams that night were wonderful scenes of himself and Padmé, but in the dreams, Padmé was 'Waiting' — which made no sense at all. He went with it though. It was just a dream after all, hazy and fuzzy and nothing like the dreams he'd once had, so he felt safe in classifying it as only a dream. She read him bits of her stories and they acted them out in the meadow near the waterfall.

Anakin woke late the next morning and had to scramble to make his meeting with Palpatine on time. Fortunately, Palpatine didn't notice or care that he was ten minutes late. He merely smiled and held out a small thin card.

"A little something for you, Vader."

He took the card, looked at it. A season pass to the opera house. That was nice of Palpatine. What was he up to? He never gave gifts. Not that Anakin was complaining. The choral parts of the funeral dirges were quite relaxing. "Thank you, Master."

"Since you enjoyed the performance so well. All work and no play makes a very dull Sith. Enjoy the pass. It's for an unlimited number of performances. Go as often as you like." Palpatine chortled and seemed close to choking himself with his mirth. "Now, I won't keep you. I know you have an appointment shortly."

Anakin's doctor had a different reaction to the season pass.

"A season pass to the tragedy series at the opera house." He sighed. "Not to quell your enthusiasm for music, Lord Vader, but have you thought this through? Funeral dirges aren't what I had in mind."

"They're not." Anakin asked, genuinely puzzled. "But they're soothing. I even bought their performance series of the season so far. I listen to it as I'm going to sleep. 'Maiden's Lament' put me to sleep three nights this week already."

A strange expression crossed the man's face. "Uh-huh. I see."

*First he wants us to listen to music and then he tells us it's the wrong kind. Where did this loser get his degree from again? He can't be a real doctor, Anakin. He changes his mind on treatment too much. Next thing you know, he'll have us submerged in water, claiming it's good therapy.*

Shut up, Vader, I'm trying to figure out why dirges are the wrong kind of music.

Vader snorted.

"Let's discontinue the music therapy at present, though I suppose if you honestly like the music you bought, you may continue listening to it. However, at the first sign of melancholy, I want you to put it all away and make an immediate emergency appointment to see me." He tapped his fingers, pursed his lips, and shifted position in his chair. "All right, Lord Vader. With the music therapy aside, we have several other options open to us. I've been looking over your file again and you mention spending many hours aboard ships with artificial lighting. Here may be a cause of those depressive moods! I believe you may be suffering a touch of seasonal affective disorder."



Anakin thought a moment. He searched his memory for that familiar sounding diagnosis and couldn't place it. "What is it," he asked.

"Simply put, it means you have a sunlight deficiency."

"Sunlight deficiency."

Vader laughed, a great long belly laugh filled with honest mirth. *This one is entertaining, Anakin. Here I thought he'd head for paint therapy or sculpting therapy, but no, he decides we need more sunlight. We're covered in this suit and we need sunlight. Amusing. You were right to keep this one around.*

"You're not alone. Oh no, many of your crewmates have the disorder. If you're hesitant to go off-ship to have real sunlight, then book sessions here on the ship with the sunlights. They're wondrous, Lord Vader! Many a crewman has had his moods lifted with a session or two a week."

"What do I have to do?"

"Simply strip down and let the light bathe your skin."

He had visions of twin suns baking his skin and shuddered as that was replaced by searing heat of lava. "No thank you."

The man was silent a moment, then nodded with a knowing look. "Ahh, you're worried about burning your skin with the light."

*You think*, Vader asked with a touch of sarcasm.

"Something like that, Doctor."

"Oh, well we could start off small, I suppose. I'll have a lamp delivered to your quarters. All you do is wear it on your head for fifteen minutes once a day and it will begin to help. But don't wear it any longer. Fifteen minutes only."

Anakin left. Doc was good to his word. The lamp arrived that night and he began to use it right away.

---

Dormé had gone to visit Beru and Luke, so Obi-Wan knew he'd have most of the day to meditate if he chose. He settled right down to it, but just when he was beginning to feel peace and relaxation, he heard an amused voice on his right.

"My own defiance I sense in you, Obi-Wan."

Opening his eyes, he found Qui-Gon staring at Dormé's dressing table with an expression of high humor. "You've been speaking with Master Yoda again."

"Oh yes. He blames me and my unorthodox methods for your willingness to toss aside your vows." He didn't look or sound too upset by that. In fact, he spoke rather cheerfully of the subject.

"I never tossed them aside, Master. I gave the issue of marriage much consideration before asking her. No matter how wrong our Jedi vows proclaimed marriage to be for a Jedi, it felt

more so to string her along day in and day out without that state in the picture. I've been down that road before —"

"As have many of us."

He continued as though he'd not been interrupted. "—Marrying her felt right. I am not rationalizing. There was a sense of rightness when we sealed our vows to each other with a kiss."

"Can you still do your job should you be called to?"

"Yes," he replied with feeling.

"Are you so certain, Obi-Wan?" All the humor bled from Qui-Gon's face, leaving him stern and serious. "For example, if you had visions of something horrible happening to your wife, would you accept it as a possible future or would you set about trying to stop it?"

Something fervent and seeking in Qui-Gon's eyes made Obi-Wan pause and fully consider the question before replying. "Visions are not always truth. The future is hard to see because time is fluid. Little things can set a chain of events in motion that could either bring about or obliterate the initial vision." Was it his imagination, or did Qui-Gon relax just a little? "It would hurt to lose her, for I admit I love her dearly, but I believe I could let her go."

"You believe or you know? Could you live without her if need be?"

"Yes. I hope that does not happen, but if it should, I could only accept it as the will of the Force that she be taken from me."

Qui-Gon sighed, features relaxing even more. "Unorthodox my methods may be, but you certainly learned your lessons better than others ever did."

"Master?" What was this all about?

He waved a hand. "Later, Obi-Wan. I'm not ready to discuss that. Honestly, I hope your heart learned as well as your mind."

Obi-Wan stared at him a long moment. "Do you know something I don't, Master?"

Qui-Gon's grin held more than a little wryness to it. "I know many things you don't know."

"I mean—"

"I know what you mean. Remember your training on all matters." He crossed his arms, leaned against the dressing table Dormé had fashioned from metal scraps bought from the Jawas. 'Above all, remember your training.' His gaze slipped about the room, the humor returning to his face. "So, have you had the time or inclination to speak to your wife about her shopping addiction?"

Obi-Wan gave up the idea of meditating entirely, leaning back on his hands. "No. She enjoys shopping and it makes her happy. I'll speak with her when she becomes out of control in it."

"Thirty yards of velvet, Obi-Wan. On this planet, when will she need velvet? Did she think about that or simply buy? I believe you've reached the out of control point."

“She’s thinking of future projects.”

Qui-Gon shook his head. “Talk with her or you’ll have no room left in this house.”

“She’s not addicted, Master. All of these things are marked for some project or other.” At Qui-Gon’s skeptical stare, he nodded. “Really. Trust me. I know my wife.”

---

Dormé smoothed the last of the items she’d decided to sell and closed the boxes, carefully double-checking the shipping addresses. She wanted to make sure the clothes got to the people who’d ordered them from her. She wasn’t about to keep clothes that Obi-Wan hated on her, even if he was too polite to tell her. Besides, the shopkeeper had been most rude in her letter, unwilling to even take returns as stated in her policy, and Dormé didn’t see the sense in continuing to patronize her shop. Really, it wasn’t like she’d asked who the woman had been! She’d just wanted to know if there were more clothes from that estate. The shopkeeper had reacted as though Dormé was trying to steal her stock.

She hated to give them up, but to keep Obi-Wan happy, she would. She’d weeded out the ones he’d tried the hardest not to make a face at and made up an ad. Even now, she couldn’t believe how many people had responded. She’d meant to sell them only for what she’d paid, but the bidding on the pieces had spun out of control and she’d ended up making quite a profit, despite the damage on a couple of the pieces.

Pausing a moment, she sat on the bed. She needed to organize the house again. For awhile now she’d been completely uninterested in doing so, but that old urge was resurfacing the more she looked at her purchases piled in their boxes along the walls. Obi-Wan had left them, knowing full well that she’d take care of it someday.

Wise man. She now had her final project to take care of before she started in on the baby’s room. Dormé had a wonderful idea for painting the walls...

---

When Obi-Wan arrived home two hours later, he found Dormé organizing and Qui-Gon watching her with an expression of awe.

“Now *that* is in interesting meditation technique, Obi-Wan. I’ve never seen such concentration apart from a Jedi. She’s been organizing that area for hours, completely calm and focused on the task. Not a thing stops her. Most impressive. I’ve seen her do this before, but never stopped to really watch her. She’s... in tune.”

Chuckling to himself, Obi-Wan left Qui-Gon watching Dormé and went to fix dinner. He knew Dormé would not budge until she was done, so it was up to him to make dinner.

---

Anakin liked the light. He felt so energized after fifteen minutes. Why not do it two times a day? What could it hurt?

Sitting down to read Waiting’s latest letter, he reached for the light and strapped it on his head. He hadn’t felt this alert in months!

He began reading, delighted to find she'd sent him another story. Soon, he was engrossed in it, getting warmer by the second. She sure could write! He'd said it before and he'd say it again. This woman had talent. She could write this stuff professionally.

Two weeks later he was feeling very optimistic about everything. His burgeoning relationship with Waiting, his work, his chances of offing Palpatine and running away with Waiting to some peaceful planet. He was even optimistic about his therapy, though why in blazes couldn't he seem to quit talking a mile a minute? He found that whenever he spoke to anyone, he talked and talked and said anything that came to mind.

Unfortunately, Vader was rising more to the surface. He could feel him there, evidenced by those bursts of temper he'd been having. Anakin couldn't sleep anymore either, despite being tired.

Strange. Maybe if he added another ten minutes to the light sessions?

It didn't occur to him to tell his doctor.

## Chapter Eight: Discoveries

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Eight: Discoveries

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

---

Timtec Taytec loved his change of career. Working as an assistant in the psychiatric department was a nice change of pace from accounting. Accounting had been soooo stressful. In fact, he could barely remember his former career at all aside from that one little point. One of the psychiatrists told him he was repressing memories, but that was ridiculous, wasn't it? What was there to repress about the accounting department?

He looked over his schedule for the day, noted that he was taking the quarterly report to the Emperor for his employer after lunch.

Timtec rubbed a hand across his chest. Did it just get harder to breathe in here? Yes, he could hear his own wheezing. Strange. He didn't recall ever having a panic attack before. He spent the morning in a bizarre state of anxiety and when the time for his meeting had come, he squared his shoulders and tried to ignore the dread snaking through his body.

He had a bad feeling about this.

---

Palpatine lifted the last of the lists he had to go through, sighing as he read the names of those enrolled in the Anger Management class currently being offered on Vader's ship. In hindsight, he should have set this up so he didn't have to approve everything, but it had seemed a wise idea at the time, a way to keep an eye on Vader's management tactics. It also meant he had an excuse to come and snoop around whenever he wanted.

He glanced up at the man waiting, thought for a second that he looked familiar, then shrugged as he returned his attention to the psychiatric department reports. Just another underling. They all looked the same after awhile anyway. Palpatine thumbed through the list. Though the class was halfway over, he had to approve tuition. He smothered a yawn as he read, barely registering the names on the screen.

'Topher Parin, Rich Quin, Lars Rupak, Anakin Skywalker, Quras Spen—'

Whoa. Wait a minute.

He scrolled back up, attention perking just a bit.

Anakin Skywalker?

Palpatine linked several time, making sure his vision wasn't playing tricks on him and finally rolled his eyes. What kind of morons was he employing that they didn't recognize the name Anakin Skywalker? That right there should have been a red flag for these idiots. The 'hero without fear' was supposed to be dead and gone, so he couldn't be enrolled in Anger Management classes. They *should* have noticed that and reported to him immediately. Really, were they all incompetent? Did he have to spell things out?

Raising a hand, he threw the underling across the room and watched him hit the wall with a thud and crumple unconscious to the floor. He was beginning to get the feeling that Anakin was completely crazy. Not that that was necessarily a *bad* thing for a Sith apprentice. However, it made him harder to control if Palpatine couldn't predict what he'd do. And it was coming to the point where he wasn't able to fully predict what Anakin would do. There had to be a reason Vader was having trouble reemerging and if Anakin had gone over the deep end, that might make him the stronger one. The previous holds Vader had used over Anakin might not even work anymore. There had to be something, however. He planned on finding it.

Right now, though, Palpatine needed to have a little talk with Anakin about that class.

---

Anakin stalked from the room Palpatine had been using as a throne room during his visit. Senile, vengeful old man! He growled low in his throat and when that felt satisfying, he did it again, then raised his hands and directed his growing annoyance outward. The sides of the passageway buckled outward, the metals screeching.

*That's it, Anakin, doesn't that feel good? A little more, if you would. Let it all out. Let **me** out.*

Vader's voice was a soothing, oily, coaxing serpent, slithering on the periphery of himself, waiting, growing stronger.

Anakin paused, placed his hands on the buckled wall and his head down. "No," he shouted, trying desperately to calm his breathing and his anger. He tapped the wall with his palms — counting one, two, three, four five, a count with each tap, a repetitive motion. With a gulp, he forced himself to focus on that single thing, letting his counting drown out Vader's voice until he felt Vader's frustration first build, then wane as Anakin regained full control.

Slowly, he took a deep breath and let it out. He hated being reprimanded and always had, but Palpatine had the ability to make him feel as though he was always in error on every single thing he did, no matter if he'd been following orders or not. It had done no good to tell Palpatine that he'd been following his doctor's recommendations. Palpatine insisted he cease attending Anger Management immediately, or else he'd be disciplined.

A movement caught his eye and he bent, snatching up the mouse droid. Those little droids had recently begun to show up on all the ships. Probably one of those projects from a learn at home droid building course. They were surprisingly simple to build and a good beginner lesson. He'd built a few himself. Of course, he'd only been six at the time and it had been to demonstrate for a friend how to do it.

Opening it up, he studied the design, shoving aside his embarrassment and irritation at having been so humiliateingly dressed down. Gradually, he noticed several little tweaks he could give that would improve the little guy. Taking it to his quarters, Anakin began to work, letting the process soothe him even more.

A plan formed in his mind, the perfect way to get back at old Palpatine. Not to mention that it was a good practical joke to play on Tarkin. He liked Tarkin, but the man needed to relax. He was far more uptight on duty than Anakin had ever accused Obi-Wan of being. Anakin smiled and sat back, imagining Tarkin and Palpatine both tripping over mouse droids. Then he smiled wider at the thought of cheap Palpatine having to hire someone to get rid of all the mouse droids that had begun to multiply faster than they could be removed.

Vader even approved, suggesting a few more tweaks, though Anakin nixed the idea of trying to make them into little assassins to kill Palpatine in his sleep. It wasn't until later that he realized Vader had been joking. Palpatine didn't sleep the way normal people did.

That was it then. He'd catch a few more of these, fix them, then release them on Palpatine's ship and the Death Star. Oh, and every other ship he went on.

---

The ivy had taken over. Padmé had finally given up trying to rip it out. Now, she simply cut it away from the doors and windows and let it grow. Dormé's little cottage was beginning to look like part of the land itself, a little hill covered in greenery. Padmé winced and realized she needed professional help. She couldn't do this herself anymore. She'd have to hire a crew to come out and take out the ivy for her.

By late afternoon she'd arranged just that, determined to clean-up the cottage in case Dormé and Obi-Wan ever came here. She didn't think Dormé would appreciate the ivy everywhere.

Going into the kitchen, she took out her latest cooking project and dished it up. This time, the stew actually smelled like stew and she thought that maybe it might be edible. It smelled like it, but she'd learned that sometimes even that wasn't the case with her mistakes. With extreme caution, Padmé took a bite. She chewed, then nodded, swallowed and smiled, taking another bite.

I did it, she thought. I can cook!

After a rather satisfying dinner she'd prepared with her own two hands, Padmé sat down to read Ani's latest letter. She was getting worried about him. Well, more than *usual*. He'd told her about being diagnosed with SAD and the treatment, but from his letters she didn't think the treatment was working right. He was all over the place in his responses, his manner changing, becoming...

She sighed, her good mood slipping away as though it had never been there at all. He was behaving much like he had at the end. He'd complained of fatigue and sleeplessness, of moods where he had trouble with anger and irritability. He'd talked of an increase in headaches. Padmé glanced through her file of notes on the condition and that treatment. Time for 'Waiting' to give her opinion and he wasn't going to like it.

At least he's talking about it, she thought. The last time he wouldn't.

Bending her head, she began to write.

---

“The problem with following a recipe is that I can’t get distracted.”

Would Waiting want to cook for him eventually, Anakin wondered. He’d like that domestic scene and the intimacy of it, but after her spectacular failures in that department, he wasn’t sure he’d really want to eat anything she prepared.

“I’ll be fine until I consider the latest in galactic news or family matters and before I know it, I’ve added one cup instead of one-fourth and the recipe is ruined. I am getting better however and speaking of getting better... I don’t wish to stick my nose in where it isn’t wanted, but your last couple letters have alarmed me, ID. You weren’t yourself, not the man I’m coming to know. The headaches, fatigue and moods? Those are all danger signs with *any* treatment, be it chemical or other. See your doctor, ID. Immediately. I’m not joking. You need to get medical help.”

A sweet concern, but rather bossily worded.

*You’d think she was our wife or something*, Vader said. *What do you see in this woman, anyway?*

Anakin considered Vader’s comment. Vader was right. Waiting’s concern was almost wifely. He knew Padmé would have urged him to see a doctor. Was Waiting right about those being danger signs? Maybe he would go see doc.

He got ready for bed, but was up after only a few hours, unable to sleep. Perhaps he’d numb his mind with late-night entertainment. That usually helped him sleep. Getting back out of bed, he lounged on his couch doing just that. There was nothing on save infomercials for various products and none that were particularly fascinating...

Wait a minute. *That* showed promise.

Anakin watched the infomercial with interest. Boy, they sure were making advances in the area of male enhancement drugs these days. And to think, if he hadn’t been awake at this hour, he’d never have known! He watched and listened with rapt attention. There were few side-effects and apparently it really helped the... fun to last for hours.

There were testimonies from half a dozen happy couples as to the effectiveness of the drug and how it had enhanced their sex lives considerably. Of course, he didn’t exactly have a sex life right now, though he hoped that was going to change in the near future.

He glanced at the datapad where all of Waiting’s letters were. He was hoping they were nearing the point in their relationship where she’d agree to meet with him in person. It shouldn’t be too hard to fake spotting a rebel signal or something from wherever she’d want to meet. He’d pretend to find one, then go meet her and come back claiming it had been an old signal. If not meeting, then perhaps she’d consent to speak face to face instead of sending letters. An actual picture would be good too. Then maybe he wouldn’t be having these irksome dreams that she was Padmé when he knew very well that his wife was dead.

‘Waiting’ claimed to be shy, but he just didn’t get that vibe from her writings.



The infomercial began over.

‘Waiting’ needed to give him some hint of her face or voice soon because those dreams he was having were starting to make him uneasy. He’d read her letters and hear Padmé’s voice in his mind, picture Padmé at a desk writing. She wasn’t Padmé because Padmé was dead, but those dreams... Anakin blotted his suddenly damp forehead with his palm. Those dreams were something else, swirling erotic images that lingered in his mind long after waking. He could barely get his work done during the day without thinking of them!

He really wanted to see Waiting’s face. Heck, he’d even settle for a neck to ankle image if she claimed it hers. Something, *anything* he could dream of instead of Padmé.

Returning his attention back to the infomercial, Anakin noted that the side effects were dry mouth, sleeplessness, dizziness and a drop of blood pressure. Pretty much the same things he had without the drug. Dry mouth from his continued need for the respirator, sleeplessness from the dreams and... well... could he really count the dizziness and blood pressure? Yes, he decided with snicker. When blood suddenly surged to one place on the body, he supposed there would be a loss of blood pressure that could account for his occasional dizziness.

He laughed and switched off the infomercial, mentally filing away the information for possible later use. With a yawn, he looked at his schedule for the next day, noticing that he had a doctor’s appointment first thing. Strange, he didn’t remember making an appointment earlier. Frowning, Anakin returned to bed.

---

The higher a patient was in the Imperial hierarchy, the more difficult he or she was to treat. That advice had been dispensed upon graduation and as Lord Vader’s doctor, Sonas was well aware of that fact despite that one’s cooperation so far with treatment. He shook his head, watching his patient and noticing straight away what he had feared was happening. He’d accepted cancellations two weeks in a row, but when Lord Vader claimed he couldn’t fit him in at all, then something had to be done.

“Lord Vader,” he began slowly and cautiously, remembering the man’s ways of dealing with doctors in the past, “how many minutes are you up to with the light?”

There was silence, a guilty squirming in the chair and then a rush of words. “Fifteen minutes was working well, doctor, so I took it upon myself to increase the daily dosage and I believe it’s been working quite well. You know, fifteen minutes isn’t very long at all and I thought longer wouldn’t be harmful in the least, so I’m up to about fifty minutes, spread out into two times a day—”

“I see. Have you had any trouble with an increase of temper?”

More silence. “Perhaps a bit.”

“You’re awfully... jittery today, Lord Vader, has that been a regular occurrence as well?”

The shifting and squirming did not cease. “Sometimes. Why do you ask?”

“Those are possible side effects, Lord Vader. There are others, but I feel we should discontinue treatment for awhile, just to make sure the light isn’t causing them, you see. Once we rule out the light, you can go back to using it.” He watched the black mask, wishing he

could see his patient's face, have some clue as to what he was really feeling. A patient's face could tell so much! But he never saw the man's face. Always the mask and sometimes, he wondered if Lord Vader had a personality problem and that Sonas was merely treating the symptoms and not the man himself.

How did he come to that conclusion? Sometimes during their sessions, it was like Lord Vader was listening to another voice aside from Sonas'. The way he'd listen to Sonas, then wait before answering, his head shaking or nodding before he spoke.

"Fine," Lord Vader said. "I'll bring the light here to you to hold for me."

A wise decision. Once Lord Vader had gone, Sonas, began to work on his idea, calling up different texts and perusing notes made by all the other doctors before him. After a long day, he had much to think about and the slightest belief that his latest idea was correct.

Lord Vader had two personalities.

## Chapter Nine: Visions and Ghosts, oh my!

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Nine: Visions and Ghosts, oh my!

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

Notes: Thank you to all those who have taken time to review!

---

With Anakin droning on in that raspy monotone, Palpatine let his mind wander. That had been happening a lot lately. He imagined Kenobi as Anakin, with a wife and kid on the way and decided that if the roles of the two had been reversed, Kenobi would be here with him and not in the suit either. It made perfect sense to him that Kenobi still would have won on Mustafar and Anakin still would have been crippled.

He sighed happily. He could almost see Kenobi, with righteous Sith calculation, slicing down the arrogant snot and ruling at his side. Belatedly, he realized Anakin was trying to get his attention. Hmm. Couldn't let it be known he'd been distracted by his own fantasies, now could he?

"I've just had a vision," he intoned in a theatrical voice, wincing a little when he thought he'd possibly overdone the drama. "There has been a great disturbance in the Force..." Palpatine trailed off, squinting in Anakin's direction. The black fabric covered figure didn't move and remained silent, giving Palpatine the irritating notion that the boy was humoring him under the mask. 'A vision. Uh-huh. A disturbance. Of *course* there was. So why didn't I feel it?' He scowled. "I have seen Kenobi here."

Not a lie, exactly. He *did* imagine the man here fighting with Anakin. When he allowed himself to drift into a semi-sleep state, he had wonderful dreams about that fight, always ending with the anticipation of it truly occurring. Of course in the dreams, Anakin was not wearing Vader's suit, but rather a strange Jedi-like outfit in some ghastly odd shade of blue. Which was ridiculous, wasn't it? Anakin had no colored clothing in his closets except for black and gray. Palpatine had looked one day when Anakin was on the bridge playing at being Vader. No color anywhere.

"Here?"

"He must be found. You will find him and bring him to me."

"Surely Obi-Wan is dead, Master."

"We've seen no body, my young apprentice. He must be alive. Bring him to me."

There was a long pause and then, "Of... *course*... my Master. I will do your bidding."

Which, if he was reading the tone correctly, and he was, meant that Anakin thought it was a stupid senseless order and had no intention of actively following it, thereby leaving Palpatine free to send someone else on Kenobi's trail who would do the job seriously. Oh fine. As long as *someone* found Kenobi.

He waved a hand towards the door. "Be about it then."

He barely noticed Anakin's exit from the room, quickly becoming caught up in his thoughts once more.

Kenobi had persistence. There was ample evidence of that throughout the man's life. Knock him down and he got back on his feet with a cool calm, again and again. Palpatine sighed. In a way, Kenobi was like Jar-Jar Binks, always coming back. Yes, the Sith needed Obi-Wan Kenobi, but how could he convince Kenobi of that?

That night, Palpatine concentrated on Kenobi, sent thoughts and suggestions flowing to him. A difficult talent, that. Influencing dreams. It took skill, though it hadn't taken much to influence Anakin years earlier. That boy had been ripe for thoughts of death and pain. Now, he considered Anakin as his practice case, turning all of his increased skill since then towards Kenobi. The man had to fear something, didn't he?

---

Oh brother, Anakin thought. Here we go again.

Palpatine clearly wasn't listening to a word he was saying. He'd been doing that so much lately that Anakin was beginning to wonder if he was going senile. Vader thought so, insisting that it was a good time to try to kill the old tyrant. Just wait until he goes into one of those self-satisfied trances and strike. He won't see it coming. Yes, Vader was full of ideas on murder. Too many ideas. Anakin kept finding himself reading biographies of well-known long-dead assassins. Vader insisted on it, claiming there must be informative material in the stories if each one hadn't been caught until late in life. A wealth of information just waiting to be tapped.

Though why anyone would raise a fuss over Palpatine dying he didn't know. Anakin suspected there'd be much rejoicing everywhere, including among Palpatine's own bodyguards. He wasn't exactly the easiest person to work for. The death rate among his staff was higher than Vader's had been.

He waited for Palpatine to notice him and when he did, barely managed not to snort. Visions? The old boy was having visions again? What was his big idea this time? Anakin knew the routine by now. Palpatine would have a 'vision' and would send Vader out in pursuit of whatever or whoever it was. Usually, Palpatine already knew where to look, he just didn't want to bother himself with it. It was just an excuse to have Vader running around the galaxy like a —

What was that? Obi-Wan? What did he want with Obi-Wan?

Anakin perked up a little. Interesting. Was this a real vision or another one of Palpatine's fool runs? Both maybe? Quickly he decided he wasn't interested in really hunting down Obi-Wan. Wherever he was, let him relax in peace. He deserved a rest, far away from the empire.

Bring him to me, Palpatine ordered though.

Yeah sure, he thought. I'll make that my first priority — after meeting my mystery lady.

Anakin left the room and went to write another letter to Waiting. She was so sweet to be concerned about his treatment. He was feeling much better since the light had turned out to be the culprit of his last problems. With it gone, his moods had regulated and Vader was slipping back behind him. Doc had scheduled them a long session mid-week, claiming he'd discovered something that could be the key to Lord Vader's problems. Anakin wondered what it was.

---

He woke with a gasp, sheets twisted about his body and sweat coating his skin. Tossing the covers off, Obi-Wan swung his legs over the side of the bed and put his head in his hands. After a long moment, and so he wouldn't wake Dormé, he reached for his robe and left the room.

He was sipping a warm drink and watching the beauty of a Tatooine sunrise when Dormé came out and slipped her arms around him.

"Bad dreams," she asked.

He kissed her temple, then set the drink down and embraced her. "Yes. They happen on occasion."

"Was it a bad one?"

"Very. I'm a bit shaken, but it'll fade in a few minutes I'm sure."

Raising a hand, she smoothed his hair back from his forehead. "You're having a lot of those." She smothered a yawn. "Anything I should know about?"

Obi-Wan slid his hand across her belly. "Just the usual anxieties of parenthood. Irrational, mostly."

"You'll be a good father, Ben. Don't worry about it. Everyone has those fears. I've been doing some reading and the books all say that anxiety is natural."

"I know." Bending his head, he kissed her, then released her. "It's far too early for you to be up and about. Go back to bed. You need your rest. I'll wake you with breakfast in an hour or so."

Dormé smiled. "You're too good to me."

"I do try."

When she had gone, he acknowledged the shimmering figure that had been waiting. "Master."

"Sith tricks, Obi-Wan. Blind searchings influencing your dreams. Someone, either Palpatine or Vader, is searching about for you using that technique. My credits are on Palpatine." Qui-Gon stroked his beard between thumb and forefinger. "Interesting. Why search for you if he has Anakin firmly in his grasp as Vader?"

“Perhaps he doesn’t have Anakin as firmly as he likes, or perhaps the Sith nature demands constant treachery and he’s looking for a new apprentice. Though he’d have to be daft to think I’d join him.”

---

Dormé stood for a moment, listening. She cocked her head to one side with a frown.

My husband has an imaginary friend, she thought. Shouldn’t he have grown out of that by now?

Turning, she made her way back to the small patio area. His back was to her and she tried to make some sense of the... conversation? Was that the right word for his soft murmurings?

He mentioned Anakin and Vader and paused now and again, nodding as though really listening to someone.

Oh Ben, I’m so sorry. She crossed her arms. The stress of impending fatherhood must have pushed him right over the edge.

---

As Obi-Wan spoke, he became aware of Qui-Gon’s expression shifting to amusement and suddenly knew Dormé had finally caught him talking to what she would perceive as thin air. Obi-Wan turned. Qui-Gon went to lean against the doorway beside Dormé. “Oh hello.”

“You’re talking to yourself again. Don’t think I haven’t heard you before.” She sighed. “I’ve heard Doctor Ashel in Mos Eisley is very good with this sort of thing. We’ll make an appointment first thing in the morning.”

“This sort of...? No, no, I’m not crazy,” he assured her.

Qui-Gon snickered in an unbecoming fashion. As a ghost, Obi-Wan would think he’d keep at least *some* elegance, but no, he’d become even freer with his opinions than he’d already been. “Well, she *does* know you, Obi-Wan. I’m sure the thought has crossed her mind before. Perceptive woman.”

“If you’re not, then why are you talking to plain air?”

“It’s difficult to explain.”

“I have the time.”

“This should be good,” Qui-Gon looked as though he planned to settle in for awhile. Obi-Wan thought it’d probably be easier to explain without the comments from his direction.

“Don’t help,” he suggested, then waved a hand as Dormé’s brows lifted. “Not you, my love. I was talking to...” He leaned against the wall. Best to just say it. “I was talking to Qui-Gon.”

“Qui-Gon,” she repeated. Her hard stare rivaled any Mace Windu had ever directed his way. Her gaze slid sideways in Qui-Gon’s direction, swept the entire area beside her and returned to him, softening just a fraction. “Isn’t he dead, Ben?”

“Yes.”

Qui-Gon shifted position. “More or less. I prefer the term Master Yoda coined: corporeally challenged. He’s becoming rather clever in those combinations, Obi-Wan. You really should contact him soon, I worry for him on that planet all by himself.”

While he doubted Master Yoda was going dotty, he made a mental note to contact him soon.

“Love of my life. Sweetie.” Dormé came to him, taking his face in her hands and smoothing her thumbs along his beard. “Dead is dead.”

“Not quite. He’s a ghost.”

Qui-Gon joined them, making tsk-ing noises. “I’m sure you’ll like Doctor Ashel very much. She’s right, he does have quite a reputation.”

Dormé didn’t look like she believed him, but she didn’t look like she doubted him, either. That was a good sign. “So you’ve been talking to this ghost?”

Embracing her, he tried to ignore Qui-Gon, which was of course impossible, as his former Master stood as close as he could. “He become one with the Force, but he is still himself.”

She nodded. “One with the Force. Okay.” Her eyes narrowed and she tilted her head. “Is this some completely normal, yet thoroughly weird Jedi thing no one but Jedi can understand fully?”

“Normal?” Qui-Gon shrugged. “Well I suppose it could be called normal for the times we now live in. A decade ago, you’d have a nice padded room in the Temple infirmary.”

“Completely normal,” Obi-Wan assured her.

Dormé smiled and relaxed. “Well why didn’t you say so in the first place? Letting me worry like that.” Her hands slipped under his robe, sliding along his sides and inching towards his back in a mini-massage. Suddenly, she stopped, giving a glance left and right. “Wait a minute. I can’t see him. He can see me though, yes? He doesn’t... He hasn’t...” She licked her lips with a frown. “He’s not around when I’m changing clothes or... naked or we’re... He turns his back at least, right?”

Stepping back with a snort, Qui-Gon remarked. “Of course I don’t watch her.”

“He doesn’t watch, Dormé. My Master is an honorable—”

“Well anymore,” Qui-Gon continued. “And not since you married her.”

“Anymore?” Obi-Wan stared at him. He’d better be kidding. “You’d better not have—”

“Oh simmer down, Obi-Wan. I’m joking. You need to relax. Have some fun once in awhile.” He winked. “Though some would say you’ve been having too much fun.” With a pat to Dormé’s belly, he was gone.

Dormé gasped, hand pressing to her belly. “Oh my!” Grabbing his hand, she held it to the spot. “Ben, feel! Can you feel it?”

Feel it? How could he not? A hard push against his palm. Sinking onto his knees, Obi-Wan shoved up the layers of her nightgown in order to see the spot. There it was, the beautiful... slightly *creepy* sight of a foot pressing out. At least he thought it was a foot. Maybe it was a hand. Leaning forward, he pressed a kiss to the spot, then his cheek. Their baby. Life.

"I am so happy right now," he told her.

After a long moment of silence, he heard Dormé's voice, soft and tentative. "Um... he left, right? Because you weren't supposed to throw my nightgown up like that. I'm not decent for company right now, Ben. What will he think?"

"He's gone."

She sighed in obvious relief. "Oh good. Could you ask him to start ringing a bell or something? Just to let me know he's arrived? I can't be a good hostess if I don't know he's there."

Obi-Wan laughed. Only his wife would worry over being a good hostess for a Force ghost.



## Chapter Ten: My Name Is

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Ten: My Name Is...

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

Notes: Making up psychiatry as I go...

---

Vader sat in his prison in Anakin Skywalker's mind, the same prison he'd sent Anakin into and wondered how things had gone so wrong. What was it that had caused the youth to re-emerge in the first place? He'd thought he had Anakin under control. He'd thought he'd never have to deal with that part of himself again.

Frustration was a constant state. No amount of plotting, threatening and seducing was budging Anakin. He remained in ascendance. An impotent rage built as he considered his current position. It wasn't as though he could tell his Master what was happening, either. Anakin had control of the mouth. He had control of the body, relegating Vader to merely a passenger position, unable to do anything save comment.

He screamed, but no one aside from Anakin heard him.

---

"Two personalities?"

Doc's prognosis stunned Anakin, though he knew it shouldn't have since it fell exactly where his own thoughts had in recent weeks.

"Yes, Lord Vader. Two. There would be the core personality — the original you were born as — and the second — as fully developed as the first and considering itself the new core."

Anakin thought over the explanation. Vader, strangely, was silent within him. He had the impression that Vader was paying close attention to the man's words.

"The question on my mind is: who are you? You were not born Darth Vader, Sith Lord." Doc leaned forward.

"How did it happen," Anakin countered. "What causes two personalities?"

“Generally, an emotional trauma so great that the mind of the core personality cannot cope, shutting down the core and allowing the second to emerge to cope with the trauma. In some cases, however, it’s a gradual switch, little episodes of the second emerging and retreating, both set upon that path by a series of stressful, emotionally wringing moments until the core simply stands back and lets the second have full control.”

Anakin shifted uncomfortably. The voice he now knew as Vader’s had been with him for a long time. He recalled Vader being there even when he was a child, speaking to him, nudging him into certain actions.

“Emotionally healthy persons can cope without a fracturing occurring, but individuals who are not emotionally healthy cannot cope. They cannot face certain situations. Sometimes the two are aware of each other and sometimes not. Why, I read a case just the other day where the two talked to each other and jointly decided matters such as bodily care!”

“Is it possible for a core personality that has, say, been *repressed* to re-emerge? To become strong enough to suppress the second that had taken over?”

Doc was quiet a long moment, his gaze in constant motion upon the mask. “I cannot say. I’m sorry. Each case is individual.” He slid a datapad across the desk. “A collection of stories — cases. You may read through them to gain an understanding of how very individual each one is.”

He left the datapad where it was. It was good to know he wasn’t crazy, that Vader was indeed separate from him in a sense.

*It’s all a bunch of bantha poodu, Anakin. It’s his most ridiculous idea yet. I’m not separate, you know that. I’m you. We’re one and the same.*

“So doc, what can cause the original core to re-emerge?”

“Anything really. Again, each case is individual. As you can imagine, this is a difficult field to diagnose and treat because of that. What works with one person might not work with the next. Not to mention that you, as a... force user... are somewhat unique to me. I’ve no idea how that affects matters, if it does at all.” Sitting back with a shrug, he continued. “We’ll treat to relieve your main symptoms, then work towards reconnection, which is a process that reintegrates the personalities into one. It’s not a fast process I’m afraid and it will be painful. We’ll need to delve deeper into your memories and you’ll learn new coping skills for stressful moments. Let’s go back to the music therapy, since it was one you did enjoy, only this time, I’d like you to pick out an instrument to learn. Begin slowly. Take your time. Now, for your bouts of anxiety, I’d like to treat you with a new drug. It’s recently been approved by the Galactic Drug Administration for use on humans.”

Vader surged forward. *Reconnection? Not needed. As for those stressful moments, you know I’m here to help you with those, Anakin. I’m always here to help. Dealing with stress is one thing I do best. But the rest? First he uses quack theories and now he wants to drug us? Tell me you aren’t naïve enough to believe him? This is Palpatine’s doing, Anakin, mark my words. We’re making progress out of this suit, so he wants to cripple us again. He wants to make us **more** of a slave.*

Anakin clenched his hands tightly together. Yes, Vader did deal well with stress in a manner of speaking. He simply choked or beheaded whoever it was that was bothering him.

“Does it have side effects?”

“Of course, but not like the light lamp.” He smiled briefly at that. Anakin sensed he was tense, yet noticed the man was doing his best to keep his patient at ease. His body language, the soothing, calm tone. “The possible side effects are increased thirst, high blood pressure and insomnia. We’ll keep close tabs on you, Lord Vader.”

“Anakin.”

“Excuse me?”

Vader made a noise of angry displeasure. *Anakin, don’t!*

“Anakin. My name is Anakin.” Reaching up, he began to remove Vader’s mask. “Before we start any drug, you need to know the entire story. I haven’t been completely honest, Doc.” His heart was pounding, Vader pushing, railing at what he claimed was sheer stupidity. Did it truly matter though if it was revealed that Darth Vader was the fallen Jedi Anakin Skywalker? Perhaps, but Anakin no longer cared. By continuing to wear the mask, he’d been hiding. No more hiding. He was going to be Anakin, *not* Vader.

Vader screamed again his displeasure.

Doc’s gaze took a long tour of his face, undoubtedly noting the scarring that was too deep to be fully repaired and then smiled gently. “Hello Anakin. Tell me whatever you feel the need to.”

“I must insist on full confidentiality, Doc. Nothing of what I say ends up before the eyes or ears of another.”

“Agreed. I keep separate files on all my patients. I do not believe the empire needs weapons against those who come to me for help.”

A unique doctor in these times. Was he telling the truth or was he lying? He’d know soon enough. Anakin chose to trust him and began the story with his mother. The words were halting and barely above a whisper, but he found he could speak about her without his grief dragging Vader closer, if only for a short while.

---

Sonas knew the name Anakin Skywalker of course. Who of his age didn’t? The ‘Hero Without Fear’. A famous Jedi.

Now Sith, he thought.

Sonas was not the imperial purist he’d made himself appear. No, he had no love for his employer, but in order to practice, he’d taken the oath of loyalty. Somehow, he’d ended up here, doing what appeared to be some honest good. Would Lord Vader turn him in to the emperor for that admission of separate files? No, not Lord Vader. Would *Anakin* turn him in? He took a risk.

He’d take many risks to heal those truly in need and this man was hurting. Sonas vowed to do whatever he could.

---

It was time to give him a name. Padmé had been thinking about that. He desperately wanted to call her something besides ‘Waiting’ and truth be told, she was tired of signing that word, even though it accurately described her state. She was ‘waiting’, in a perpetual *state* of ‘waiting’. What name could she sign that would not be immediately recognized? She wanted something that was still close to herself. Her own name would not do, nor any of her immediate family. After much consideration, she decided upon her great-grandmother’s nickname. Only family had used it and her great-grandmother was long dead. Anakin wouldn’t know the name.

Norel. She’d sign her letters ‘Norel’.

---

Anakin took his medication for the day. Each morning, he had to stop in at Doc’s office and pick up his medication. The tactic was to prevent another fiasco like the light lamp. He understood that and didn’t mind it. It was one less thing he had to think about during the day. Sitting down with the latest reports from that stupid search for Obi-Wan that Palpatine had ordered, he ignored the growing files and called up the new letter ‘Waiting’ had sent.

He hadn’t had time to read it earlier and was grateful for the interruption of his daily tasks. Since revealing himself to Doc, it had become more difficult to keep up Vader’s work. He was growing weary of the masquerade and longed to reveal himself even though he knew Palpatine would likely kill him.

Heck, Palpatine probably already knew. How could he not? It wasn’t like Anakin was keeping up Vader’s workload anymore.

A part of him thought he should be a little more concerned about the possibility of death, yet Anakin liked the mellowness taking him over recently. He barely had any anxiety at all these days. In fact, the deadlines for the various projects — busywork — Palpatine gave him didn’t really concern him and he’d heard some of his men wondering if Lord Vader was feeling okay. He hadn’t disciplined anyone in weeks, nor had he choked anyone. The man had said something about shoes dropping...

He took a long drink of water and began to read. The letter was much shorter than previous letters and he sensed a hesitation in the flow of the words.

“Dear ID,

It has come to a point between us that I feel we need to add a layer of trust. This is a big step for me, please understand, for a person I trusted greatly broke my heart into tiny pieces. You’ve been remarkably patient with my reluctance to share my image and name. Not many would be so patient. Therefore, I will reveal something of myself. You may call me Norel.

I look forward to your reply.

Yours,

Norel — Waiting”

He sat back with a smile, taking another long drink. A name. It stunned him. He felt as though she’d given him some great gift. Her name, something personal to refer to her. She was trusting him and could he do any less? He decided he’d sign his letters as... Ani.

---

His wife had a shopping problem. Obi-Wan decided it was probably time to face that fact. Qui-Gon had been correct and he hated to admit it. He'd honestly been certain she'd had projects planned. She hid the problem well, he had to admire that. However, he couldn't miss the boxes going in and out at a frequency that made him certain the empire would swoop in here out of suspicion of rebel activity. Not only was she addicted to shopping, she now had an addiction to selling things.

Obi-Wan wondered how she'd managed all those years to keep herself from debt. It didn't take much to solve that question once he really thought about it. She'd had little time to shop until recently and little build-up of credits to spend. First, she'd been a handmaiden, focused on her duties and then she'd taken care of her father and once he'd died, she'd had Padmé to look after. It wasn't until recently that she'd had the free time to wile away. Not to mention the credits had grown with interest, leaving her fairly well off and able to spend with abandon.

The baby's room was outfitted with all sorts of things they didn't need and he somehow thought a baby wouldn't want to be wearing ruffles and lace all the time. She'd gone nuts for ruffled, lacy little dresses, though why dresses? They were having a *boy*, weren't they? That was what they'd been told. Unless Dormé knew something the med droid she'd seen didn't.

He pursed his lips and crossed his arms. It was time for an intervention.

---

This was really becoming embarrassing. Anakin shifted on his knees, wishing Palpatine would shut up already so he could go find the refresher. When Doc had said there might be increased thirst, Anakin had failed to connect what increased thirst meant. Thirst meant water going in which meant... As a consequence, he now knew where every refresher was on the entire ship.

*You know what I find soothing, Vader asked with a malicious undertone. A waterfall. The splash of water upon rocks. Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle. Don't you find that soothing, Anakin? It's an invitation to relax and just let everything go. Splash, tinkle. Think about it.*

Vader was getting much mileage out of that little problem. He could make a very convincing whooshing sound, like waves coming in to the shore. He did so with relish. Anakin shifted again. He couldn't wait much longer. Reaching out with the Force, he did everything he could think of to make Palpatine's image waver and finally cut out. With a satisfied sigh, he left to take care of the bodily problem and returned in time to see Palpatine's image spring back in to view.

"Technical difficulties, Lord Vader?" Palpatine looked annoyed. Did he know what he'd had done?

"Yes, Master."

There was a long pause and finally, "See to it that it doesn't happen again."

"I will, Master."

"Have you any success on the Kenobi issue?"

Kenobi issue? Oh yes, that stupid search. “Nothing at present. He’s hidden himself well.” Of course, ‘well’ was subject to interpretation, wasn’t it? If Anakin hadn’t bothered looking, then Obi-Wan hiding in a closet in the next room could be considered hiding well, couldn’t it?

“Make Kenobi your priority.”

The image winked out. Anakin returned to his reports, blatantly ignoring the order, completely unconcerned with any consequences that might appear later.

---

The cottage was dark and quiet. Sounds drifted in from outside: animals, birds and insects, the treetops rustling in the wind, the water lapping at the ground. Padmé paid attention to none of those, curled on her bed with her arms clasped about a pillow. She sobbed, eyes closed.

Sometimes, early in the mornings, the loneliness of her situation crashed over her like a wave, tumbled her about and left her drained and limp. Her arms ached to hold another person, her skin craved any touch and she was very afraid she’d die alone in this place, a withered husk bereft of love and affection.

With a last squeeze of the pillow, she forced herself to get up and get moving. Shower, dress, eat a meal though she wasn’t truly hungry. And then to sit alone, always alone, living vicariously through Dormé.

On impulse, she planned an outing, making arrangements before she could change her mind. She wanted human contact.

It was time to meet Ani face-to-face.

---

Qui-Gon sat across from Padmé, watching her. So much pain. Not for the first time he wished he could comfort her. She was strong, however, and would pull through this bout of depression. She always did, making herself move forward. This woman had a strong will. Even when he’d first met her, he’d known that about her, for what teenager could govern and reign as Queen without possessing such a will? There had to be a strong will, a sense of what was just and a wisdom beyond those young years.

“I wish I could help you, Padmé.”

As though in response, she cocked her head and frowned. She couldn’t hear or see him. He knew that. It was only her own sense that she’d grieved enough for one day. How did he know that? Because she straightened herself tall and reached for her half-finished letters. After a moment, she began to write.

Qui-Gon left her to the task and decided to visit Obi-Wan. With luck, Dormé would be organizing something and he could admire her technique. He hadn’t been kidding when he told Obi-Wan he’d never seen anything like it. Dormé fascinated him.

She was sweet, kind, loyal and exactly the sort of woman Obi-Wan needed. Her strict neatness complimented Obi-Wan’s tendencies as a slob. Neat professionally, he was the

opposite in his personal space, letting himself spread out a bit and be comfortable. Dormé's adventuresome palate kept Obi-Wan from becoming settled in bland, boring food choices. She brought that irreverent spark inside him closer to the surface and he in turn tamed her obsessive mannerisms.

The two met in the middle on most everything and it was Qui-Gon's opinion that Obi-Wan had been right to have married her. He *should* have taken that chance, for it had encouraged him to grow as an individual instead of becoming settled into the past. Yoda disagreed, but then Yoda hadn't been watching the two. Grudgingly, and with many 'hmph's, Yoda had allowed that perhaps if he'd also observed, his opinion might be swayed. Might being the operative word.

Walking into the living area of the house, Qui-Gon found Dormé surrounded by boxes and Obi-Wan talking in a low, extremely angry voice. He left quickly, but the gist of what he'd heard was thus: Dormé had a shopping problem and Obi-Wan wasn't going to take it any longer.

## Chapter Eleven: Mistakes

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Eleven: Mistakes

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

Notes: Thank you so much for the reviews! Oh, and there *is* a ballgown story in the works(see the chapter below for an explanation of *that* note).

---

Obi-Wan watched his wife sob and wished he wasn't having the urge to apologize for laying down the law. He hated it when she cried. First, her lower lip would quiver, the first of many tears slipping from her eyes. If not comforted soon after the quivering began, she'd emit sharp, barking sobs he'd swear were super-sonic. Her shoulders would shake and the gulping would start up, long indrawn gasps that indicated she was trying to stop and couldn't. Then, the wails would commence, her face going red and eyes bloodshot.

He'd like to say she cried prettily, but that honestly wasn't the case. Dormé was a mess when she really cried. Once the crying was over, her head would hurt, she'd have hiccups, and would sniffle for two or three hours. He was very glad he'd only witnessed four of these crying jags total and two of those had been since she'd become pregnant.

"Crying will not make me change my mind," he said, which by her hurt stare was apparently the worst thing he could have said.

Maybe there was a reason the Jedi had forbidden this...

"Your purchases haven't been logical, Dormé. Most of them weren't things we needed even."

She pointed to the baby's room.

"Well, most of those were, but really, why have you been buying dresses? We're having a boy. Boys don't usually wear dresses." Although he could recall one incident where Anakin had donned a particularly frilly ballgown and long wig on an assignment. Frowning, he crossed his arms. "I will admit that the clothes shopping did not bother me. What *did* bother me were the yards of velvet and silk that you kept storing in the oddest places and the craft tools mixed in with the kitchen tools. Not to mention the sort of crafts you claim to be taking up. Dormé, my love, I don't believe you're taking up woodworking and that half finished cradle you bought does not convince me you're taking it up. Why? Because you won't have it finished anytime soon even if you were actively working on it."

"Next time," she mumbled, her sobs tapering off before slipping into full out wails.



“Next time?” Obi-Wan suppressed a sigh. She hadn’t even birthed the first baby and she was planning more? ‘No. We will go through each and every recent purchase together and sell what we don’t need. Dormé,’ Going to her, he knelt and took her hands in his. “We have to think of the baby and the future. That means we need to keep finances in mind. You can still make purchases, but we can’t be spending funds as though there’s no tomorrow.”

She nodded. “I know. I *do*, but...” Her teeth grazed her lower lip. “Can I keep the velvet at least? I’d like to make something for Padmé. She hasn’t had a really nice cape since her funeral...” Dormé broke off with a laugh. “That didn’t come out right.”

He knew what she meant though, and was glad to see her tears were passed. Padmé would probably like to receive a present. “The velvet is fine.”

“Can I keep the silk too?”

“What’s it for,” he countered.

Dormé glanced around the room, obviously trying to think up a suitable project and finally said, “A nightgown!”

“You have a trunk filled with nightgowns. I hardly think you need another.”

“Not for me. For *Beru*. Yeah, for *Beru*. She doesn’t have many luxuries and I thought—”

Rather than argue, Obi-Wan decided to let her keep the silk. Why not? It folded up into a tiny pile anyway. It wasn’t like the rest of her purchases, spilling out into the living area. “Fine. We’ll keep the silk and the velvet, but the rest will be gone through.”

The rest of the evening was spent looking through the purchases.

---

He was fighting Obi-Wan again, only this time it was not on Mustafar. Anakin’s breath labored in his chest, but he could not free himself from the pull of the dream. He’d rather dream of Padmé!

There she was suddenly, still and silent, a crumpled heap on the ground. Anakin heard Palpatine’s cackling somewhere to his left, twirled and caught a glimpse of himself reflected in the window. Outside he could see stars and inside was a mix of his old self and the current. He was scarred, not deformed, his hair very short and his clothes like what he’d worn as a Jedi. Similar. He couldn’t figure out what was different about the clothes.

Obi-Wan was the same. Same clothes, hair and beard. Except... There was a change in his old Master as well, also something he couldn’t identify.

His gaze continued to the left of the reflection, catching a glimpse of a robed kneeling figure near Padmé. Who was that? It wasn’t Palpatine. Instinctively, Anakin knew the figure to be female. He felt fear and a helpless anger from her.

Obi-Wan pressed forward, then retreated, distrust radiating from him and a curious feeling of... hope? “Death will come, you know that,” he said through clenched teeth and Anakin heard his own voice answering, his *real* voice, from before Mustafar.

“Then it comes. I don’t fear the end, Obi-Wan. I embrace it, whatever it may be. I must do this.”

His former friend and Master leapt back, lightsaber tossed upward. Anakin called it to him, snatched it from the air and with the two blades in hand, continued forward. He slashed and —

—woke gasping and shaking. In seconds, he had the lights on and was sitting up, arms clasped about his knees. He rocked, stared at his feet and rocked a bit more, until his heart stopped the horrific fast pounding.

*You wouldn’t have to endure such dreams if you’d let me out, Anakin. Why are you being so stubborn? Don’t you remember all I did for us? We’re a team, the two of us.*

Obi-Wan and I were a team, Vader.

*Yes and Obi-Wan betrayed us, didn’t he? So much for teamwork.*

You’re a part of my mind, nothing more. You’re a separate personality.

There was a chuckle. *Doc Sonas has you believing that, does he? I’m you, Anakin. We’re one.*

Perhaps, he told the voice in his mind. But I remember a time when I could barely hear your voice. If you’re me, how could that be? Your voice would be my voice and it’s not. Your voice has always sounded different. Explain that.

Silence and then, *Have it your way. Just remember that while you can drug me into silence with that anxiety medication, ignore my voice and will me to be gone, I will never fully leave you. Like it or not, I am part of you and I will take my chance to rise when it occurs.*

Then I’ll give you no chances.

*We’ll see.*

Vader slipped back again, leaving Anakin with a sense of finally being alone and alone he wondered how long before Vader made a coup on their body. Which one of them would be the victor of that battle?

“I won’t fear,” he whispered. “My fear and anger gives him strength.”

It was true, wasn’t it? It was also true that the drug helped, somehow quieting Vader in the process of quieting Anakin’s anxiety. Doc had adjusted the dosage, leaving Anakin a bit less mellow than he’d been and it was helping. He still had the thirst problem, but with the adjusted dosage, that had lessened as well and he thought he was beginning to become used to the water intake level.

To calm himself further, Anakin slipped from bed and began a series of stretches. His latest improvement had been to add synthskin to the arms and legs. The first time, after Dooku, he’d been at ease with that new arm, unbothered by the meld of machinery and flesh. Now, however, he wanted to distance himself from Vader and physically, Darth Vader was a huge cybernetic being, more machine than man. To distance himself and regain a sense of self, Anakin went with synthskin. It amazed him how real it could look. They’d matched his skin tone perfectly.

Palpatine didn't know about that yet. Anakin wondered if Palpatine would rage the way Vader had. Vader's protestations weren't logical. He'd approved of the other improvements for their body. The problem, Anakin thought, was that Vader wasn't liking sitting in the background doing nothing. He wanted to be out in Anakin's place, doing that Sith dance of loyalty and treachery with an eye for usurping Palpatine. He was impatient, wanting the physical process completed immediately. Not later, *now*!

Anakin was grateful Doc had gone to the appointment with him, spending the time keeping up conversation on the most inconsequential matters. The latest food offerings aboard ship, the mouse droid problem that seemed to be getting worse and things like that.

Bending, he looked at his toes, wiggled them. They looked like toes again. And his hands. They looked like hands. He looked whole once more.

I will be whole, he thought, finishing up and deciding he'd spend these early morning hours writing a letter to Norel. It was a surprise to find a letter waiting for him. The contents surprised him more.

---

Vader still didn't know what had gone wrong. He'd examined the issue for hours at a time, cursing the tendency for his self to fall into sleep the same time Anakin did and railing at the new tendency for sluggishness in his thoughts. He had trouble thinking clearly and Anakin wasn't helping matters.

Insisting Obi-Wan had been a real friend. Thinking Padmé had behaved from love. Looking at this woman he'd been corresponding with and thinking he had a future with her. How did he even know it really was a woman? She could be a 'he' and wouldn't that be interesting when it was revealed? Anakin didn't understand what was really important, did he? He'd lost touch. He no longer remembered the way things were.

Anakin was stuck in the past. He kept doing all those stupid things his doctor insisted upon...

Vader shook his head. Damn it! He couldn't think!

I have to do something. I have to let my Master know what's happening before it's too late.

But why was he suddenly certain Palpatine wouldn't do anything to help him? Why did he fear that his time as Apprentice had come and gone and his days were now numbered?

Vader let the thoughts go and paced his prison once more.

---

I'm going to meet her, I'm going to meet her, I'm going to meet her!

Anakin had trouble holding his excitement back. Norel had agreed to meet with him in person. She'd suggested the place, the time. The time was the next day. The place was a secluded resort on Naboo. She claimed the restaurant was famous in the area for food presentation and that the dining room had many private areas. Norel was making those

arrangements. They'd meet in the late afternoon for an early dinner. She'd intimated in her letter that they'd be spending the night together.

His hands shook and for the fifth time in the past hour, he went through his luggage, making certain he had everything he could possibly need. He had clothes, toiletries, respirator and oxygen tank. All packed. Enhancement drug and protection — just in case. He didn't want to disappoint her or end up with a surprise in a couple months if she meant what he thought she meant.

He'd had the latter and wasn't taking any chances. He could imagine Palpatine's reaction to such an occurrence and had no desire to be on the receiving end of Sith lightning. It didn't exactly mix well with a good portion of his body. Indeed, Palpatine seemed to have forgotten his idea that Anakin... no, *Vader*... had a paramour stashed away somewhere.

Would they really get personal though? She'd never seemed like the wild type in her letters and they were just meeting. He supposed she *could* mean they'd talk all night. Anakin paused in rearranging the contents of the case. How many ways could '*I predict we'll be awake until the early morning hours*' be interpreted?

Boy, he sure hoped they were going to get personal!

Was she living on Naboo? Was that why she'd chosen the planet? Or was this resort simply a place she liked to visit? Something he'd have to find out. Shouldering his bag, he checked his appearance. It amazed him how many people didn't recognize the name Anakin Skywalker. He was back to using it for the most part, save when he was on the clock. On the clock, and for anything official, he still answered to Darth Vader.

Should he be surprised at not being recognized? No. He no longer looked as he had before Mustafar. Oh, he still considered himself a handsome man, just not what he'd been. The reconstruction had helped smooth some of the worst scars on his face, but the remaining ones lent a craginess to his features that gave him a roguish air.

He ran a hand across his head. His hair was beginning to finally come in, though the scars gave it a patchy appearance if he let it grow too long. Doc had suggested keeping it shorn close to the head and Anakin agreed. He wasn't bald, but close to it. All in all, Anakin decided he looked good. It could have been far worse. In another reality, he might have even been stuck in that suit for the rest of his life.

With a nod, he left his quarters. His staff had their orders and he didn't want to be late to meet Norel.

---

The resort was everything Padmé had read it was and more. Quiet and secluded, it was the perfect place to meet Anakin. There were few people around and they could have relative privacy for this reunion.

And if she'd made a mistake and Ani from the letters wasn't her Ani after all, she could bow out quickly.

Padmé returned to her room and stared out the window at the entrance. She smoothed her dress. It was one that Padmé had commissioned one of the women in the craft club to make

for her. It was high-necked so as not to distract him, but now that she thought about the design, perhaps it hadn't been a good idea after all. The design was rather like the dress she'd worn the day he'd kissed her on the balcony.

For a moment, she contemplated changing, then shook her head. No, this dress would have to do. She didn't have another fancy enough for the restaurant and it was too late anyway. He was going to be here any time.

She'd already checked with the desk and he hadn't arrived yet. She clasped her hands together. When she'd written that they'd be up late, she'd thought that perhaps they could talk. Now, as she waited and remembered the letter, she wondered what he'd thought at that. Did he think they'd be spending the night together? Would he want to when he realized who Norel really was? After all, they were still husband and wife. They could...

What am I doing, she thought to herself. He's going to think he's seeing a ghost. He'll... I can't do this. I can't meet him. I can't be here. I'm not ready.

One hand raised, covered her mouth as worries tripped about her mind in a dizzying whirl. The appointed hour came and before she could think anymore about her actions, Padmé left her room.

---

The restaurant was shadowed and romantic. Anakin waited at the table. He'd been hoping she'd already be here, but she wasn't. He'd taken the chair facing the main door, though he had no idea what sort of woman he was looking for. She'd sent that description, but it rather applied to many women on Naboo. Petite and trim was the norm.

He sipped his drink. He felt Padmé in this place, which made sense in his mind as she'd loved the area. It didn't surprise him that he'd think he felt her here, a phantom lingering made real only by his mind. What surprised him was the intensity of that feeling. It was as though she was alive and had been in these rooms perhaps the day before.

Anakin sighed heavily. He should not be thinking of Padmé when he was meeting another woman for dinner. It was wrong and he suspected Norel might find it a tad on the creepy side if he even hinted he was still slightly hung up on his dead wife.

*Dead* wife, he reminded himself several times. Padmé is dead. I don't really feel her here. It's only my imagination.

Maybe this wasn't a good idea. Maybe he wasn't ready to start dating, like one of those doctors had told him. Maybe he should leave before she arrived and have a message waiting for her. They could always meet later.

---

He looked good. Reconstruction had gone well, just as he'd said, and Padmé felt relief flood her body. He was still Anakin under the mask. The features were his. Ani from the letters was her Ani after all. She had not erred.

Tears trickled down her face and she whirled before he could see her standing there.

---

“Sir?”

Anakin was torn from his doubting thoughts by the hostess.

She smiled. “I’ve a message from your companion.”

Norel had a family emergency and was unable to make their plans. However, she’d still like to meet with him another day and would of course continue writing.

He accepted the message with... relief? Yes, that was it. Relief. Maybe the next time they should meet somewhere other than Naboo. Definitely, he decided. It was only Naboo that was making him think of Padmé. Meet Norel well away from here and he wouldn’t have this strange sensation of guilt.

On his way back to his ship, Anakin pondered that sensation. It was bizarre and irrational, but he had the definite feeling that by meeting with Norel in person he was somehow cheating on Padmé. He decided he’d better make an emergency appointment with Doc as soon as he returned. He really was touched in the head if he thought having a date was cheating when his wife was long dead!

## Chapter Twelve: Home Again

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Twelve: Home Again

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

Notes: Again, many thanks to those who have taken time to review!

---

“Dear Ani,

I’m dreadfully sorry I could not meet you for dinner. I would have informed you earlier of the change of plans, but it was rather sudden. I had not seen it coming at all. It was one of those sudden surprises that life sends out from time to time. Are you amenable to setting another time and place? I’m afraid I won’t be able to get away for —”

Padmé paused in her writing. How long could she conceivably get away with? One month? Two? Their eventual meeting was now inevitable. It was only a matter of time before they came face to face and had to confront the past and the future. If his letters reflected who he’d become, then they would be able to work towards a future together, but if he was lying...

She didn’t want to consider that idea. If he was lying, then there was no future for them and her belief he could be redeemed from his actions was a false one. Padmé erased the last line of the letter and went on to discuss her cleaning up of the cottage. She described the removal of the ivy and of her packing up of those projects she didn’t think she’d finish. What she didn’t tell him was that she’d donated the supplies to the craft club. Everything had gone to them, leaving her with only novels and puzzles left to fill her time.

Well, that and the most recent project that had somehow dropped into her lap. A secret project it would be best if no one knew about.

For a dead woman, Padmé decided she was quite active. Veiled and robed to hide her identity, she’d been helping set up a doctor network in this section of the galaxy. When letters to various editors and to senators had yielded nothing, she had, of course, taken matters into her own hands and begun feeling out individuals about the rebellion still in fledgling phase. They needed someone who had organizational skills. Padmé had those in abundance and so she was organizing the rebel medical network, quietly recruiting doctors who’d taken early retirement from the Imperial Medical Association.

It was still a small network, but she thought it was a good one. Besides, if she could thwart Palpatine she would. He had brought more pain to her than anyone, for he had been instrumental in Anakin's turning. She knew that.

Padmé sent off the letter and looked about the cottage. It was time to face it, wasn't it? She couldn't live in isolation. She hated it. All of those diversions had done nothing for her. She hated being hidden away, separated from everyone and everything. There was a reason she'd begun to clean out the cottage and her current belongings, if only she could admit it to herself.

I can't stay here, she thought. So where am I going to go? Back to Tatooine? Back to sand, rocks and two suns that bake a person until the slightest cooling of the air brings just enough relief to feel even warmer when the heat again rises? Yes. Back to Obi-Wan and Dormé. Back to friends who would gladly share their exile with her. She'd have to live with Dormé's pregnancy, now nearing the end, and the baby when it came.

She was strong enough to do it. She'd go back and live with them, despite memories and longings. Why?

Because she was Padmé Naberrie Amidala Skywalker. She was strong.

Padmé began to pack.

---

Anakin embraced the little side therapies designed to relieve the symptoms of his condition even if he did find some of them a little odd. Like this one.

He stood just inside the door to the shop in one of the many garment districts of Coruscant, staring at the rows and rows of fabric with a sensation of having stepped into a bizarre world he'd never understand. The place was huge. How did anyone find anything?

"May I help you, sir?"

Turning his head, he saw a blue haired woman as tall as he was. "I sure hope so. I have an appointment with Lanis for a wardrobe consultation." His tongue stumbled upon the words. He'd never had to think about clothes before. As a slave, his choices had been beige and white. As a Jedi, his choices had grown to include browns as well and as a Sith, he wore primarily black. He'd discovered there were hundreds of tiny variations in black.

Vader claimed black was a classic, but Anakin thought Vader liked the color mainly because blood didn't show on it.

Doc had suggested he get his colors done, insisting that wearing a nice shade of orange or yellow could make anyone's mood perk up. The idea of orange made him cringe. He remembered a particularly ugly ballgown he'd once been forced to don that had been orange... Lanis at Color Code Wave — CC Wave for short — was supposed to be the best at both color and wardrobe consultations.

"Are you Anakin, then?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Oh welcome!" Her smile widened. "He's waiting for you in his studio."



Anakin followed the willowy woman through the rows of fabric and into a room a mere fraction of the size of the previous one. For the rest of the day and into part of the night, Lanis introduced him to color and style.

There were pinks, blues, oranges, yellows and greens. No reds though. He hated red and for good reason. Palpatine loved the color. Spring green was Anakin's new personal favorite, that and a dark purple-navy. The green reminded him of new beginnings and was very uplifting. As for the purple-navy... He wasn't sure why he liked it exactly, but he did. Then came the patterns and the clothing designs. Lanis recommended tunics and vests and capes and Anakin was amazed at just how many styles of tunic there were. Why, he could wear a different style every day and not repeat a single one for nearly a year!

He left carrying ready-made tunics in the spring green and purple navy and a few articles to go with each. He was pleased with the day and with the wardrobe he'd have soon. He couldn't wait to wear it all!

---

Anakin was a lost cause. Palpatine was disgusted by that turn of events. Years of his time and effort were wasted. That boy had Vader wedged so firmly down inside him that Palpatine wasn't sure now just what could be done to cause Vader to re-emerge. Too bad Anakin's running about the galaxy hadn't produced another wife or baby. That would have been good, though he suspected Anakin wouldn't be as shattered a second time. Why? Because his attachment to Padmé Amidala had been carefully nurtured and prodded by Palpatine whenever possible.

No matter what Anakin and Padmé had thought later, a ten-year old should not have an obsession with an older girl that lasts more than a few weeks at most. It wasn't normal for a boy to dream of that girl for ten years and not turn his affections to others. Anakin had never been quite normal though and Palpatine had done everything possible to keep Padmé Amidala on Anakin's periphery.

Unfortunately, the boy no longer trusted him with such matters. Palpatine did know he'd been writing to some woman somewhere, but nothing had apparently come of their romance so far, if it was indeed a romance. He'd made a recent trip to Naboo, probably to meet her, but had stayed only a few hours. Unless this woman was of the easy variety — and he didn't think she was — Palpatine doubted anything had occurred.

Anakin had quit using Vader's expense account for things such as flowers and travel expenses, so Palpatine had to snoop in Vader's personal accounts now for information. There were strange things lurking in the lines of that account summary and things he didn't care to see.

Clinic expenses that included such words as 'synthskin' and 'limb shaping'. Pharmacy bills with prescriptions for anxiety medication and a male enhancement drug, and oxygen tanks. And most recently, a bill from some place called 'CC Wave'. He could only guess what that was. Probably some sort of brothel. The bill was certainly high enough for one of upper end places.

He tapped his fingers and yearned for the good old days, back when Vader had been in charge of the body and had not hesitated to strike fear into the hearts of any dissenting voices.

These days, he was lucky if Anakin said 'boo'.

Kenobi had to be found, that was all there was to it. Palpatine needed a new apprentice and fast. So why did he keep Anakin around in the meantime, he wondered to himself. Partially because he still needed him to do the paperwork and grunt work and partially because the farcical scenes of Anakin's existence recently were amusing him in a 'fascinated by gore' sort of way. Watching Anakin run around had become entertainment to him, like those weekly trips to the theater. He had a morbid curiosity as to what Anakin would do next.

Oh well. Find Kenobi, groom him a bit and let the two have it out once more. Bye-bye Anakin. Hello new apprentice.

Getting up from his chair, he left the room. Time for another trip to see the Death Star construction. Briefly he wondered if Tarkin had been able to make any headway in the mouse droid problem. Irritating things. *Who* had the nerve to keep setting them free on Imperial ships?

---

Timtec Taytec liked his new career. He could work alone and take only the jobs he wanted. Pest extermination was not exactly hard, but this? He held out the mouse droid. "You see, I can't complete the job because these aren't living creatures."

Moff Tarkin's lips tightened. "They certainly manage to multiply like it."

"But they aren't, so I can't finish the job."

"Your field, Mr. Taytec, is pest control. Those," he pointed a bony finger at the droid, "are pests. Surely you can finish that line of reasoning by yourself."

"Of course sir, but my field is extermination. There's a difference between control and extermination."

"Is there? I was under the impression that both were your field."

"No sir."

Tarkin's eyes narrowed. "Well then. Perhaps you should explain to the Emperor why you took this job when you have no intention of finishing it."

Panic tightened his throat. "The... the... *Emperor?*" Suddenly, Timtec felt itchy all over and more than a little claustrophobic.

"Yes. He'll be arriving soon. Have a report ready for him on the actual nature of your services. I doubt that he will be pleased with your deception."

"Um... no, sir... I meant to say," he gulped, wiping at his profusely sweating brow with one hand, "I'll get started immediately on that mouse droid problem. You can count on me."

Tarkin's lips thinned further, nearly disappearing altogether, but he turned without another comment and stalked away. Timtec let out a deep breath and set the droid down. No way was he sticking around here. It was time to find a nice planet in the Outer Rim to retire on.

No one was going to make him give a report to anyone. *Especially* to Emperor Palpatine.

Not quite understanding why, he left his equipment, informed a trooper he was done and that the mouse droids would begin dying out soon, and left on his small ship. He sold everything he had, changed his name and lived for long years as a hermit. No one bothered him and he never had another blackout.

He did, however, frequently suffer from nightmares where he flew about a room in a cloud composed entirely of stinging light creatures.

---

Obi-Wan and Dormé welcomed Padmé back to them with open arms. The room she'd used was now ready for the baby, but Padmé didn't care. She'd sleep in the living area if need be. She told them about her last project, which brought a fierce frown to Obi-Wan's face.

"Can't stay away from it, can you, Padmé? What is so difficult about being anonymous and out of intrigue? Do you have to enmesh yourself at every opportunity?"

"I had to do something," she argued, watching Dormé out of the corner of her eye. Her friend was hugely pregnant now and Padmé wondered if maybe they'd gotten her due date wrong and she in fact over-due. "I couldn't sit back—"

"Why not? Why not let the galaxy go to blazes? We have the children for the future. Keep yourself safe and let them grow—"

"I've been talking to Ani, Obi-Wan."

He sat back as though he'd been punched, a sickly expression upon his face. "You've what?"

Padmé leaned forward. "Don't worry, it was anonymous. We've been conversing since shortly after I left here."

He wouldn't listen, reiterating how stupid he thought she'd been to leave in the first place and sliding them both back into the old arguments they'd had on the subject. When he stalked out of the house, Dormé looked up from her sewing.

"He's a little tense lately."

"I shouldn't have come back here. I've made it harder for you both, haven't I?"

"Maybe. Maybe not." She slipped a hand behind her. "Oh, I wish my back would quit hurting."

The comment distracted her. "Hurting how? You're not going into labor are you?"

Dormé frowned. "No, I've still got a couple weeks. Can't wait until it's over. I'm sick of being pregnant."

Padmé was grateful for the change of subject.

---

Obi-Wan moved to the speeder that had brought Padmé here and leaned against it.

How could Padmé be so stupid as to get involved with the rebellion? He'd thought her more intelligent than that. She was supposed to be hiding, keeping a quiet life. What had made her think getting involved would be good on any level? And then to come here?

Now he'd be worrying even more that the empire was going to come here. What was going on in her mind? Had she gone insane? Possibly if her claim of contacting Anakin... no, *Vader*... was true. There were times when he didn't understand her at all. Did she have a death wish now?

Glancing up, he caught a glimpse of metal flashing in the distance, but it was quickly gone and he returned to his ponderings.

---

It wasn't often that Palpatine had recurring dreams in his half-sleep state, but this one was most enjoyable. He watched Kenobi and Anakin fight, ignoring Anakin's strange clothes. Back and forth, moving closer. Palpatine smiled, caught up in the delightful scenes. He wasn't idle either, busy plying some deserving soul with Sith lightning. It was quite a satisfying show of power and he thought it was about time this person realized the extent of his power and got what was due.

Who was it?

Did it matter? It was a dream after all.

He saw Kenobi leap backward, tossing his lightsaber into the air and then —

Roused fully to the sound of a voice. One of his bodyguards. Irritated, he sat up. "What is it?"

"A message for you, my lord."

Moments later, his irritation was replaced by anticipation.

Kenobi had been found.

## Chapter Thirteen: It's a Trap

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Thirteen: It's a Trap

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

---

There was a scant amount of information regarding Kenobi's current situation. Palpatine perused what little there was. Discreet inquiries revealed that Kenobi was living with two women. Both were reported to be quite attractive. He chuckled, imagination speculating upon the tidbit.

Well, well, Master Kenobi. Not quite as uptight as Anakin thought, are you? Two women even. Anakin only got one and the stupid boy committed himself to her alone.

Two women. Kenobi went up a few notches in Palpatine's esteem. Who would ever have guessed to look at him? He had that boring air down pat. Palpatine knew how difficult one woman was to juggle and wondered, did they have a schedule worked out or something? They must to keep jealousies at bay. Equal time with Kenobi. Interesting to ponder. He must remember to ask about that.

He tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair and stared out the window at the planet below. If Kenobi had a thing going with two women, that indicated he wasn't a model Jedi, which in turn would make his conversion much easier.

Oh, he just loved it when his plans settled in to place! It gave him a heady rush far more potent than any narcotic. Palpatine envisioned glorious days ahead once more with Obi-Wan Kenobi at his side.

---

The process of Obi-Wan going out the door on an errand took nearly as long as the errand would itself. Padmé watched them from the corner of her eye, reminded very much of how she and Anakin had once behaved.

The two would hug, a huge undertaking alone due to the size of Dormé's pregnant belly, then exchange a series of kisses. In between those kisses they would whisper low to each other. Padmé heard several pet phrases and names that raised her brows in amusement and

brought a blush to her cheeks. Out of all the pet phrases, Obi-Wan's favorite appeared to be 'saucy wench', at which Dormé would giggle in a girlish fashion. He repeated it often.

It was rather nauseating really. Padmé wondered if she and Anakin had been as obvious as Obi-Wan and Dormé were. She suspected now that they had been and their relationship had been a very open secret.

Finally, Obi-Wan stepped back, one hand flipping his hair back into place with little success. Dormé had messed it up pretty well. Tufts stood up in back. He had a warm twinkle in his eyes and his face was flushed. A goofy grin turned his lips. "Well then. I'll be back in a few hours."

"Hurry home," Dormé said in a breathy whisper.

Padmé hurriedly averted her eyes, anticipating yet another round of affection. Several times she'd almost retreated to give the two privacy, but they'd thankfully calmed themselves before that had been necessary.

"Contact me if you need me. Don't hesitate."

You'd think they were newlyweds, Padmé thought, suppressing a sigh.

"I'll miss you," Dormé cooed at the doorway.

"No, I'll miss *you*," he replied, stepping outside.

"I'll miss you more."

"No, I'll miss *you* more."

After a few more minutes of *that* exchange, he left and Dormé promptly collapsed onto the couch beside Padmé, putting her feet up on the low table. "Tell me more about that doctor network." She fanned herself with one hand.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not? I think I can keep a secret."

Why wasn't it a good idea? Because it was something Padmé felt she should keep close for now. It wasn't the time to reveal what she'd arranged. Besides, the less Dormé knew the better. In a short while, she was going to have a child to raise. Being near a Jedi was bad enough on the danger scale, but add the rebel medical network into that? No, Dormé would remain ignorant of Padmé's latest work. That way, she could honestly claim ignorance if anyone asked and she and the child would be safe. Relatively.

"I'll tell you later. Why don't you show me this nightgown project you mentioned?" As she'd hoped it would, the suggestion distracted her friend.

Dormé put on some music and indicated which box Padmé should open. The color of the silk was a beautiful pink-orange. 'Melon' she thought was the name of the color, which was appropriate, for the shade was the same color as the sweet melons grown in regions of Naboo. There were sketches of designs resting on the silk and Padmé thoroughly approved of the final design. It was simple 'v' neckline, with slim straps. The fabric would be bias cut. Dormé planned the embroidery to run diagonally from the right shoulder, across the top edge of the

bodice to the center, then run diagonally once more all down the side of the gown to the hem. It was going to be absolutely lovely when completed.

No decision had been made on the exact embroidery design, so they settled down with several, discussing the pros and cons of each and changing color combinations so as to best compliment the shade of the fabric. They were well into planning when there was a noise outside.

Dormé looked up. “Ben? You’re home early. Didn’t they have the part?” She switched off the music.

There was no answer. Padmé went still, her body stiffening. A sense of danger filled her. She cocked her head and listened a moment, then rose from her seat. Dormé did the same, reaching for their cloaks and tossing Padmé’s to her. They hurried into them, ready in case they needed to run out into the desert heat.

It could be sandpeople. The house was in an area they frequented. Or it could be animals. They’d had problems with animals prowling about before. It could be many things.

Padmé snatched up the binoculars Obi-Wan kept by the window, her heart a fierce pounding in her chest. Focusing, she searched the visible area, managing not to gasp when she saw the two ships to the right on the desert floor.

Imperial troops.

There was no activity around them. She squinted. When had they arrived? Had she and Dormé been so wrapped up in the project that they’d not noticed the arrival? Stupid! They both should have been paying attention. They should have heard the arrival and Padmé never should have returned to Tatooine to begin with. She’d been careless hadn’t she? Assuming the empire would not find any of them. Blithely tripping about the galaxy as she had been.

The whole of her own recent stupidity flooded over her. Obi-Wan had tried to tell her, hadn’t he? He’d tried to —

“Padmé?” Dormé’s voice was a whisper.

“Troops,” she returned, still looking in vain for any sign of them.

“How many?”

“Two ships, but I don’t see anyone.”

“Two ships for three people?” Dormé was in motion as she spoke, flipping open one cabinet and drawing out two wicked looking blasters. “That’s overkill —”

“Unless they knew they were after a Jedi,” Padmé finished for her.

“I don’t plan on going easily.”

Padmé turned, took the gun her friend handed her. It was a standard, if somewhat souped-up model. One blast would pack quite a punch. “There’s no sign of them. We’re probably already surrounded.”

With a nod, Dormé moved towards the back of the house. “I’ll check the rear.”

A man in full soldier uniform blocked the doorway. “That won’t be necessary. Drop your weapons.”

Padmé leveled her weapon at the front doorway and Dormé kept hers on the man. “You first,” Dormé said in a sweet tone.

And then they were firing, killing soldiers as more entered the house until...

Padmé’s blaster jammed. She swung it viciously at the head of one soldier but the blow never made contact. A fist slammed into her face and her world went black.

---

Something was wrong. There should not be smoke pouring from his home, not even if Dormé had managed to burn dinner. Great plumes of black swirled up to the sky. His heart leapt into his throat and the sweat on his body seemed to suddenly become ice.

Obi-Wan pushed the speeder to its limit. A small Imperial transport waited a short distance from the house. He sensed no one. Not Dormé or Padmé. Panic made his limbs tremble and he took a few calming breaths before leaping from the speeder and running into the house.

The blasters he’d bought for Dormé were discarded on the floor and he had time to see both scorch marks and blood on the walls and furniture before the smoke forced him to retreat outside. There were no bodies. Relief eclipsed the panic. They had not left bodies for him to find. A small kindness, but what awaited him above?

His glance turned to the transport. Obi-Wan boarded it, a calm falling over him. He prepared to lift off. This, he knew, was a trap. There was nothing else it could be. They’d known he’d try to rescue the women and left the transport here for him to follow. The bait ploy. Dangle the bait and reel in the hunted one. He’d hoped this day would never come.

I should have been watching for it, he thought. I should have remained vigilant. I....I’ve had many other things on my mind and the empire finding me was the least of them.

Qui-Gon’s words came back to him and he bowed his head.

*Can you still do your job should you be called to? Can you live without her if need be?*

Sitting back, he stroked his beard in thought. Don’t act on emotion, he told himself. Look at it from all angles. What is the right road at this juncture? The man you are tells you to go after them, but what does the *Jedi* you are tell you to do?

After a moment, Obi-Wan piloted the ship up from Tatooine’s surface.

Sometimes, the right road was the very one loving emotion set one upon. On that, the Jedi he was agreed with the man he’d become.

---

The seat was uncomfortable and the company was odious.

Dormé cradled Padmé’s head against her belly and inspected the swelling place on her lady’s jaw for the fifth time since they’d lifted off. Padmé had yet to regain consciousness. Around her, she heard the coarse conversation of the men; their speculations and crude



innuendos. They seemed to be under the greatly mistaken impression that Dormé and Padmé were concubines of Obi-Wan's.

Another time, that might have amused her. Her questions were met with snickers and the only thing she could get from them was that the Emperor wanted to see them. She bit her lip, not looking forward to the meeting. Would Obi-Wan come after them? Would he rescue them from Palpatine? Was it even possible to rescue someone from Imperial capture? Dormé suspected it would be difficult for Obi-Wan to do so, if not impossible.

She worked the hood of Padmé's cloak up over her lady's head, then searched in the folds until she found the veil that fastened across the face below the eyes. There. Now it was only herself under their scrutiny.

Of course Obi-Wan would come after them. It was silly to even think he wouldn't. He was her husband and he loved her. She trusted him with her life, with *everything*. He would come. She let herself picture him in her mind, his head next to hers on their pillow as they'd discussed baby matters just that morning. His kisses had been gentle...

Tears stung her eyes and she blinked them away. I won't cry, Dormé decided. I won't let them see me upset by this turn.

"What's your name?"

She looked up. The man asking was not a clone trooper, or one of the other troopers. His uniform was that of an officer. Dormé met his gaze with the haughtiest look she could muster and copied the regal tone Padmé had often used. "My name is of no importance to *you*."

"We'll know soon enough, lady. Might as well tell us." At her silence, he snorted, gesturing to Padmé. "How about her name? Is *it* of importance?"

"She is my handmaiden."

He nodded. "Of course she is. Which culture? Am I going to have to dig through buried files to retrieve her true identity? I know you ladies love to change your names upon taking a... posting."

She narrowed her eyes at him. Several choice names in six languages came to mind, but she didn't loose any of the curses upon her tongue.

Crouching down in front of her, he leveled an amused stare at her stomach. "Is the kid the Jedi's?"

She returned her attention to Padmé, relieved to notice that Padmé's eyes were open and she was listening. "I do not see how it is your business."

"It's the Emperor's business. He wishes to know the state of the two women picked up. I intend to tell him with as much detail as possible. Now, is the Jedi the child's father? He'll wish to know."

Dormé didn't respond.

"I'll take that as an affirmative." He stood, conversed in low tones with one soldier, then nodded and returned to her. "Well, well. Dormé Kaserrah of Naboo. Told you it'd be soon.

But as for your... handmaiden, I still have no identity for her. Strange. As though she does not exist.... Tell me her name.”

Padmé chose that moment to sit up, then turned and clasped one of Dormé’s hands. Her gaze implored Dormé to let her handle this, but Dormé couldn’t. She’d spent far too long protecting Padmé to sit back.

Padmé’s lips tightened with displeasure. “Are you all right, milady?”

Shades of the past. She recalled saying those words to Padmé. Dormé nodded.

The man, who hadn’t told them *his* name, grabbed Padmé’s arm, jerking her to face him. “Give me your name.”

Padmé was silent a moment, but then there was the hint of a smile behind the veil. “You can call me Lady Sky.”

He released her with a raised brow. “Lady Sky? Somehow I get the feeling you’re not being entirely honest, but never mind. The Emperor will find the truth of it. I’ll leave you to *him*.” The ship landed and he motioned to several soldiers. “Take them to the Throne room, then return here. The Emperor will meet you there, ladies.”

The trip through the halls revealed little in the way of personnel and the lighting was low. Dormé wondered on that. Where was everyone? She exchanged a puzzled glance with Padmé. Aside from their escorts, they’d only seen Palpatine’s red robed guards. Dormé had a bad feeling about this. Something was not right.

The baby kicked inside her, an uncomfortable press.

The throne room had obviously been hastily converted from something else, but what Dormé wasn’t certain. There were several consoles on two walls whose nature she could not discern without a closer look at the panels. Was this possibly a secondary bridge? A redundant command center? Perhaps, she decided, peering at the consoles with a speculative stare. Palpatine always did like to be in control of everything and he’d have control at his elbow in case he needed it. Her glance took another turn about the room. There was an over-use of yards of red fabric and the chair Palpatine sat in looked out of place.

“The prisoners, my lord.”

The soldiers were dismissed and once they were alone, Palpatine frowned. “I know you. You were a handmaiden to Padmé Amidala.” He nodded. “Yes, I remember you. Quite loyal. You returned to Naboo to live, so what are you doing in Obi-Wan Kenobi’s house on Tatooine?” The question appeared rhetorical as he didn’t wait for an answer, continuing on in that cool tone. A leer curved his lips, his attention lingering on her belly. “I believe I can guess what you were doing, hmm?” He chuckled. “Naughty of Kenobi. He certainly has a thing for handmaidens.” A mock innocent expression twisted his features further. “You... *are* aware you aren’t the first of Amidala’s handmaidens he romanced?”

She kept her expression neutral. Of course she’d known about the other handmaiden, but to be fair, Obi-Wan had still been somewhat of a rash youth at the time and he *had* tried to explain to the woman why he had to break ties with her. Obi-Wan had shared his past with Dormé and she’d done the same. When she showed no outward response, Palpatine’s humor faded.

“Where is that lady now and where will *you* be when he tires of you?”

Beside her, Padmé drew herself up tall, the folds of her cloak rustling.

Palpatine turned his attention to Padmé. “Remove your veil, woman. I would see your face.” His eyes narrowed and he leaned forward, hands clenching the arms of the chair. “I know your presence as well, however... something eludes me. I sense something... *someone*... who should not be here and yet is. Remove it.” His voice became guttural on the last two words.

Padmé shook her head.

His brows raised. “Remove it, or I will.” There was a beep, his glance lowering to the datapad on his lap. Slowly he sat back in his seat. Satisfaction fairly shimmered in the air about him. “Very well. We’ll wait a few moments. Then, the truth will be out.”

Dormé gritted her teeth against the sharp pain in her lower back and shifted her weight. The baby was active in her belly and she wondered how long she’d be able to remain standing. She slipped her hands under her stomach and hoped Ben would get here soon.

---

He had been summoned. Anakin wasn’t sure what annoyed him the most; being summoned or the fact that he had to go to the space directly above Tatooine to meet with Palpatine. He snorted at that. Tatooine of all places.

Luckily, he’d been in the area. His curiosity had gotten the better of him the past couple days and he’d been on Naboo when the urgent summons had come, heading for the area Norel’s letters had originated from. Ready to meet her or not, he’d been determined to track her down and so he had. Vader’s clearances had proved useful in that quest and Anakin didn’t know why he hadn’t thought of that before. How had it eluded him? He could have met with Norel immediately after that first letter. If Palpatine had not ordered that he drop everything or else, he would be introducing himself to her right this minute.

No matter, he decided. He’d simply go to her after this meeting with Palpatine.

Anakin thought on what he’d been able to find out so far. There wasn’t much, Palpatine keeping him short on details like usual. There were two prisoners, both women. He recognized the name of one. Dormé Kaserrah. He hadn’t thought about her in a long time. He remembered she’d worked for Padmé once. What was she doing here and why was it important that Vader show up? Was this something to do with the rebels? The update mentioned she was very pregnant, as though it was an important detail. Palpatine wanted Vader there immediately. Likely it was a rebel matter and he’d be on his way soon, able to finish the rest of his day off in peace.

Anakin didn’t think he’d bother changing into the suit. It wasn’t as though this would take long.

Docking his ship, he noted the strange absence of personnel. A sense of déjà-vu swept over him, memories of another time he’d traversed deserted corridors. That memory also had Palpatine in it.... His ship was the only one there and he saw no one as he walked. Strange, which meant that Palpatine was really up to something this time. A ship with a skeleton crew

in an isolated part of the galaxy. Palpatine didn't want witnesses to whatever he anticipated happening.

Not good. Not good at all.

Just what had Palpatine orchestrated this time? His last performance had netted Anakin into the embrace of the dark side and caused Vader to emerge ascendant. What did Palpatine anticipate?

Anakin stretched his senses out, then paused in his strides, tilting his head a little. He stopped walking.

That felt like... No. It was his imagination. Padmé was dead. And that? No. Obi-Wan wouldn't fall for any of Palpatine's plans.

But his presence was getting stronger the longer Anakin stood still.

Then the sound of running behind him. Lightsaber ready, he whirled to greet his old Master.

## Chapter Fourteen: Next move? Spring It

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Fourteen: Next move? We Spring It

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

---

Obi-Wan came around the corner with his lightsaber brandished.

Anakin waited, watching the older man stumble to a stop before the point of attack. Obi-Wan's free hand flipped back the hood on his brown robe. There was shock in Obi-Wan's eyes. Anakin found it strange to have to really look down at Obi-Wan now. He really towered over him.

"Darth Vader."

He watched his former friend take note of his clothes — all in a quick second —, mild confusion replacing the shock. Were the clothes part of the confusion? Personally, Anakin liked the purple-navy. He thought it looked nice on him; just right against skin that hadn't seen enough real sunlight in years. "Obi-Wan." Anakin lowered his blade.

"Why are you not in the suit?"

Logical for a first question he supposed, since the last time Obi-Wan would have seen Vader on anything, Vader had been wearing that suit. "I'm off the clock. Today was supposed to be my day off, but you know how that goes. Always on the move." He smiled.

Obi-Wan's lips parted. "Anakin," he whispered, the name a question. "I haven't seen your hair that short since —" He stopped himself, shaking his head.

"Since the lice incident on Koonly moon," Anakin finished for him. "I *still* say that wasn't my fault."

Obi-Wan looked around as though expecting attack, which Anakin allowed he had the perfect reason to think. "Who *are* you?"

"*That* is a truly interesting question. It's one I've been asking myself for months. The answer is not as simple as it should be." He deactivated his blade. "We should talk."

"With you, there has always been a great chasm between what you *should* do and what you *do* do."

"I'm well aware of that, thank-you, Obi-Wan. Have you more words of wisdom for me like you always did?"

"Not that you ever listened."

"I did try."

"*That* is what you always said." He kept taking tiny glances about them, his lightsaber ready for the fight Anakin didn't plan to get into at the moment. "Are you going to fight me again?"

"Not right now, no."

Obi-Wan's frown deepened, but then his features smoothed out once more. "Sith tricks. I'm ready for you."

Anakin leaned against the wall. "Fine. Stay ready while we talk." He knew they were evenly matched if they did wind up fighting. Anakin was still powerful and if he allowed himself to tap into the dark side as he'd done constantly as Vader, he would beat Obi-Wan hands down. He didn't plan on tapping into it. He didn't need to. There could be a harmonious end to this if he looked for it.

I've grown up, came the sudden thought. When did that happen?

"Talk? I find that hard to believe. You've never been inclined to talk when you could be acting."

He sighed, nodding. "You're right."

"Of course... what?" Obi-Wan straightened from his fighting stance. He appeared more confused than ever, but never once let down his guard. "What did you say?"

"You're right. I always acted first and thought second. One reason I got myself into so much trouble. Doc and I've been over this." They'd covered that to ad nauseam, in fact. A part of his therapy was to examine past actions.

"You're trying to lull me. Playing at being a negotiator. I've seen what you call negotiating. Vader doesn't use words."

"I'm not Vader."

"Oh really?"

"Well, in a manner of speaking I am, but he's separate. I'm Anakin." He pointed to himself.

Obi-Wan took a few steps back. "I'm hallucinating, aren't I? Some kind of scentless nerve gas pumped into the corridor."

"No, really. It's a long story, Obi-Wan, but trust me. Right now, I'm Anakin. I'm the man who was your Padawan, who was once called the Chosen One. I'm ascendant and I plan on staying that way. The dark side is seductive, I do admit that, but I will remain Anakin. The dark side cost me everything and as long as I remember the price of it I can resist the lure. I know how to cope now. I've learned the tools I need."

“Why should I trust you? You tried to kill me.”

“And you me, so we’re even on that.” He couldn’t blame Obi-Wan for not trusting him. He wouldn’t trust himself either were he Obi-Wan.

“Are we?” Obi-Wan advanced, circling so that he was on Anakin’s left instead of his right. “Are we truly even? I want my wife back.”

Anakin straightened, trying to make sense of what Obi-Wan had just said. Wife? A joke surely. Obi-Wan was always the model Jedi. He wouldn’t have a wife. It just couldn’t happen. Having a wife went against the code unless one had a special dispensation for it. With the Jedi gone, there could be no such thing issued. “Wife?” But if he did... Palpatine’s summons, coupled with Obi-Wan’s presence, began to really make sense. This wasn’t a rebel matter, was it? He’d assumed Dormé was an important rebel leader. Just because she was pregnant didn’t mean she couldn’t lead.

Pregnant. Oh no. Obi-Wan was married and his wife was pregnant. He began to pace the hallway, puzzling it all out. Palpatine had ordered Obi-Wan found and so he had been, but not by Vader. Palpatine wanted Obi-Wan all of a sudden. Why was he desperate to have Obi-Wan?

Vader pushed, tried to speak, his voice a mere whisper compared to what it had been. *Haven’t you guessed by now? Are you that dim? This is the end for us, Anakin. He’s found his new apprentice. Palpatine doesn’t need us. Remember Maul? Dooku?*

No, he returned, feeling Vader’s rage rising inside him. It won’t happen. Obi-Wan will never turn. He would not allow himself to become twisted.

*He has a pregnant wife. Look at his face. He loves her. Tell me, Anakin, what it was that you did for love and the safety of **your** wife? Then look at him and tell me he would not do what he could to save his. His love has already twisted him. He follows your path. He’s becoming... me.*

“I know you’ve been looking for me,” Obi-Wan said. “You found me, so there was no need to take Dormé. You had no reason at all to take my wife. You could have waited for me to return and taken me. There was no need for a trap. I’ve always known we’d face each other again. My wife is not a part of this, not part of what is between you and me. Let her go. She is no threat.” He again settled into a fighting stance. “I can even understand taking Padmé. Are you happy now, Vader? You have us both.”

*I can even understand taking Padmé.* Vader repeated the words in Anakin’s mind. *You have us both.*

Blood rushed, pulsed in Anakin’s ears. His thighs trembled, belly clenched. “Padmé.” He sagged against the wall, feeling more than a little sick. “You’re lying. Padmé is dead. She’s been dead for four... almost five years now. She... He told me. I saw her funeral, her grave —”

Obi-Wan stared at him, gradually relaxing. “You don’t know? You never guessed the truth.” There was such sadness on his face. “You really didn’t know she survived.”

Anakin choked and laughed at the same time, the sound hysterical to his mind. Her presence wasn’t his imagination? Then he took it a step further, remembering all those times

he'd thought he felt her. Nausea rolled inside him and he was very glad he hadn't had a meal in hours, or he would have tossed it up right onto the floor. He'd really felt her. All this time he'd really felt Padmé. His wife was alive. "No," he moaned, for if she was alive then he'd erred greatly in the past months. He'd turned to another woman, betrayed Padmé as he'd once wondered if he'd been betrayed.

Vader hurried to speak. *Two betrayers in one place. We can finish it all. Palpatine and the two who turned against us in the very beginning. Forget everything else. Finish it!*

"She's alive," Anakin whispered half in question.

"Yes. She is alive and perfectly healthy unless your Sith master has changed that."

Tears clouded his vision and a peculiar lurching sensation settled in his stomach, joining the nausea. "I thought I'd killed her. He told me... but I'd thought before you and I... she was alive. I'd sensed that. I thought he was lying, hoped he was... I saw her funeral."

"Staged for the benefit of all. You choked her... Anakin. You did not kill her and to this day she claims to forgive you."

He raised his head, heard Vader curse rather inventively at that. Padmé forgave him? After everything he'd done, she forgave him?

Anakin swallowed hard and pushed himself up from the wall. He knew what they had to do. He drew himself up tall, still more than a little vertiginous over how much taller he was than Obi-Wan. He'd always been tall, but those original legs Palpatine had ordered for him had changed his height by several inches, making him a towering fearsome presence over most beings. When he'd upgraded he'd kept the added height. "I propose a truce, Obi-Wan. I'll help you rescue Dormé and... Padmé." His tongue tripped over her name.

"And what do you want from me?"

"A small amount of assistance in disposing of the Emperor."

Suspicion glinted in Obi-Wan's intent and solemn gaze. "What is to prevent you from seizing power once he's gone, *Darth*."

Anakin cringed inwardly at the misuse of the Sith title. Or, far accurately, Vader cringed in annoyance.

*He's an idiot, Anakin. We can take him. Let me choke him and we'll tell our Master it was an honorable fight to Kenobi's death. Then, we'll dispose of Palpatine and rule ourselves. We can even have Padmé again, if Obi-Wan's claim of her having forgiven us is true. Think of it. We haven't lost a thing after all. She forgave you and if she can forgive that expression of our anger at her, she'll forgive us the woman as well. We thought she was dead, so how could she not? And this: if **she** survived, then what of our baby? The baby, the **child**, may be alive also, somewhere close to her if she was on Tatooine. We can have everything back the way it was.*

Closing his eyes for a split second, he took a deep breath, trying to ignore Vader's siren words. It was so very tempting, but the past was the past. There was no going back and everything *had* changed. Anakin didn't even let himself imagine the future Vader whispered at him. "Darth is a title, Obi-Wan, like 'master' or 'senator'."



"I know," his former friend interjected with a needling smirk, though he suspected Obi-Wan of stretching the truth on the subject.

"Besides, I wouldn't answer to 'Darth' or 'Vader' right now to anyone besides Palpatine. I'm off the clock and when I'm off the clock, I'm Anakin Skywalker." He folded his arms and waited for a reply.

Obi-Wan's mouth opened and closed several times and he finally shook his head. "You *have* gone fully round the bend. That's the most absurd thing I've ever heard of. A Sith who is only such during set working hours? Absurd."

"Maybe," he acknowledged, "but that's how it is. The two are separate. I *will* help you rescue the ladies and I *will* destroy the Emperor today, with or without your help, though I admit it would be easier with your help. Palpatine is a wily old thing, but he's been too concerned with the running of the galaxy lately. He doesn't practice like he once did. He's become lazy, complacent and more arrogant than ever. In hindsight, I should have let Mace Windu kill him. There will be chaos from it, I know. The galaxy is far from stable, yet I believe there's enough of the senate left to perhaps..." Anakin shook his head. They didn't have any more time to hash this out. They needed to act. "We're wasting time. What's your decision, Obi-Wan? Do we trust each other or not?"

Anakin waited for the answer.

---

Time was running out, Obi-Wan knew that. The man before him — Vader, Anakin, or *whatever* he was calling himself — needn't point it out. He was at an impasse. Did he trust him? Did he not? Which road did he take now?

The force will guide me, he thought.

The man felt like Anakin and not him at the same time. There was no anger beneath Anakin's surface, only a determination. What to do, what to do?

A leap of faith.

Obi-Wan deactivated his blade and saw Anakin visibly relax, a boyish grin upon his features. "Well... Anakin. What is your plan? I assume you have one worked out already?"

"Of a sort. I know you can't fully trust me, Obi-Wan. I accept that. Palpatine called me here for a reason and since I find you here as well, I believe we're to duel once more. My aim is to rid the galaxy of him. Let's give him the fight he wants."

With the calm of a man used to outlining plans and having them followed to the letter, Anakin laid his idea before Obi-Wan. It was a good plan, solid and entertaining for Palpatine as long as he didn't realize what was really happening until it was too late. "Interesting. How long have you been considering his demise?"

"Long enough."

Obi-Wan nodded. "If you attempt to take his place as Emperor, I will kill you."

"I know," Anakin sighed. 'And if I attempt it, then you should, for that means Vader has returned and this time, he would not let me have any semblance of consciousness. It would be kindest to execute us in that instance.' The grin returned. "But that won't happen, because Vader isn't here right now."

"Don't be cocky," Obi-Wan told him and together, they moved down the corridor. Never once did Obi-Wan ease up his vigilance on Anakin. He vowed to be ready no matter what occurred.

---

Anakin was on his way and Kenobi burst into the room as Palpatine finally used the force to rip away the veil the second woman wore.

"You will return my wife," Kenobi said, with the calm cool Palpatine remembered. "Let Dormé go. She is not a part of this."

Palpatine stared at Kenobi and the pregnant woman. His wife? With a sinking sensation in his stomach, he realized just what the woman was to Kenobi and the difference between Kenobi and Anakin in regards to it. Kenobi's emotions were not as chaotic as Anakin's had been. He would not react the same way to her eventual death. The woman was not a true weapon against him.

What was it with Jedi and Naboo females? He heaved a disgusted sigh. First Anakin and the 'Padmé affair' and now Kenobi and the... what was her name? Oh yes, Dormé. The 'Dormé affair'. Another Jedi with a pregnant wife. For crying out loud. An honest, hard-working Sith couldn't groom a future apprentice without tripping over fertile Naboo women. Really. What was in the water on that planet anyway?

He relaxed in his chair, not in the least worried at the weapon Kenobi held. Anakin would be here soon and those two would have it out. His gaze strayed to the second woman. Small, petite and dead years earlier. Padmé. Of all the complications to appear. Although, now that he thought about it, her death *had* been awfully convenient. Padmé had never been so compliant in her life. He should have known she'd survived. He should have insisted on seeing her body himself.

A sudden extension of that thought made him shake his head.

If *she* survived, then did the baby as well? It couldn't be any other way, could it? Somewhere in the galaxy was the Chosen One's offspring. Palpatine imagine fate was mocking him now.

Mock, mock, mock.

Anakin came through the door. He was dressed in civilian clothes that seemed strangely familiar. The color nagged at him, something he should remember... No matter. Anakin had a steely expression on his face and the familiar Vader feel to him. There was a roil of emotion below the surface of him, Palpatine felt it clearly.

"Vader, you're here. Come. We have a... situation." He looked again at Padmé. "Padmé Amidala. I believe you know my apprentice Vader by his previous name. Anakin. Your husband."

He'd expected shock or some sort of response. Irritatingly, the woman only directed a bland stare his way. He turned his attention back to the men. Anakin scratched his cheek with his forefinger while Obi-Wan rubbed his nose and flipped his hair back from his forehead.

"Obi-Wan," Anakin said, walking calmly towards his old Master.

"Vader."

They both settled into a fighting stance and Palpatine smiled. It was about time. Get this show on the road already. Out with the old, in with the new.

Still, something about the scene bothered him.

---

The shock of seeing him here, in his official capacity, grieved Padmé. Would he really kill Obi-Wan? Beside her, Dormé dropped onto her knees with a groan. She couldn't take her eyes from the two men fighting. There was an air of boredom between the two, as though they were rehearsing for a real fight and not fighting in reality.

She had to do something, but what?

There was no convenient weapon in her line of sight, nothing she could use...

Palpatine's attention was on the fight, not on her and Dormé. She was young still and he was an old man. Padmé wasn't about to sit and wait for death to truly take her. Not this time. This time she was going to claw her way down into that cold embrace.

She moved without giving herself time to second guess the action and found that her hands gripped his throat quite nicely before she was suddenly on the floor, pain arcing through her body.

"Foolish woman."

---

Palpatine was not ready for Padmé's action. He had not thought she'd leap at him bare handed. Her grip on his throat made him furious. Upstart woman! Why couldn't she have died when she was supposed to? He used the force to throw her from him and raised his hands, pleasure coursing through him when she screamed and thrashed in agony from the energy he directed her way. Feel my power over you, he thought and somewhere in the midst of his actions, he realized what he'd been forgetting.

His dream. It was no daydream at all, but rather a genuine prophetic vision. But he couldn't remember how it had ended. Or had it ended at all? He recalled Anakin and Obi-Wan slashing at each other and Kenobi's leap, but then... nothing.

Wake up, Vader, he thought. Crawl out of Anakin like you did before. Ride his anger and try to take back your place. Strike at me and let Kenobi kill you.

Yet while he felt emotion from Anakin, it wasn't like it once had been. An unaccustomed anxiety gripped him. Kenobi wasn't what he'd expected and now that the man was here, Palpatine wasn't certain how to reach him; make him act out. He'd had it all worked out in

his head, but somewhere along the way, the players of this drama had quite following his script for them. No one was doing what he expected. Curse it all!

Strike at someone, Anakin! Do it already! Make Kenobi kill you or kill him and be done with it! I don't care which!

What finally transpired could not have surprised him more.

---

Anakin saw Padmé move out of the corner of his eye; saw Palpatine toss her away. He twirled...

And saw himself in the window. His recurring dream came tumbling back. Fighting Obi-Wan, Palpatine using Sith lightning on Padmé, and the robed figure kneeling, helpless and angry. Not a dream. A vision.

In that split second, he knew he could live without Padmé. He didn't fear losing her at all. The revelation startled him. Had he truly come to grips with her death? Only she wasn't dead, so it didn't count, so he could face losing her now. Right?

He blinked, attention returning to Palpatine. The older man cackled as he plied Padmé with the lightning. Did he expect Anakin's attention to remain there? Did he expect Anakin to react with anger running free, thus allowing Obi-Wan to kill him?

Yes. That was what Palpatine expected to happen. But he didn't know everything. He didn't know the new Anakin, the one who learned from his mistakes.

Inside his mind, Vader raged, clawed to be free. *Strike, Anakin! Use me, I beg you! Use our anger to focus—*

The words were oily, Anakin ignoring them. He and Obi-Wan continued their fight, movements so fluid they would appear choreographed to any witnessing. Indeed, they were choreographed by long years practicing together. They were still in tune. Step, twirl, jump, turn. He was different than he'd been though. He compiled everything Vader knew about techniques to make this fight look hard and furious, feeling as though he was almost outside of time and while it was not a new sensation, it was new to his reborn self. Since rising from Vader, Anakin had not experienced such a moment. Until now.

In all honesty, he felt... balanced. For the first time in his life, he felt evenly spaced inside himself and not pulled in fifty differing directions. It was a good feeling.

Obi-Wan held his own.

"Death will come," Obi-Wan said and Anakin suddenly knew what was different about him. He was a man in love, fighting for those he loved, yet he did not let that love overtake him. He knew his duty and he did it, would continue to do it, even if it took all from him.

"Then it comes. I don't fear the end. I embrace it, whatever it may be. I must do this."

Closer and closer to Palpatine. Obi-Wan frowned, tossing his lightsaber into the air and leaping back.

Anakin caught it and with his and Obi-Wan's lightsabers in hand, advanced upon Palpatine, who whirled, forgetting Padmé.

"You're no match for me boy. You may have been the Chosen One once, but no more. You're nothing and always will be. Come on then, if you're so eager to die."

They fought, blades meeting again and again. Anakin kept advancing, his cybernetic arms and legs tireless. Against Palpatine's frail and fully human body, he was superior in strength. How long until Palpatine turned the lightning on to him and the circuits that gave him strength were destroyed, leaving him helpless?

As per their agreement, Obi-Wan sent objects flying towards Palpatine. Such a chance Obi-Wan was taking. If Anakin were truly Vader right now... His focus tightened, here and now and not upon the past, the future or Padmé. This was between him and Palpatine. "You made me a monster."

"You came willingly enough," Palpatine panted. Was it honest exertion or was he trying to lull Anakin into thinking the fight was nearly finished? He sensed Palpatine's overconfidence and wondered if the man's arrogance had become such that he would overtip his hand thinking he still had full control of the situation.

He redoubled his efforts, expecting any second to feel the pain of circuits dying from a massive electrical surge. "No more. This ends here."

I will sacrifice myself to end the Sith for good, he thought. As long as I can take Palpatine with me.

Then Palpatine was on the ground, one hand cut off. "No, no." His voice was guttural, filled with malice and Anakin tumbled back in time to the moment in Palpatine's office, with Mace Windu poised to strike. "It'll never be over. You *are* Vader. There is no going back. Accept it. Face it. Let your anger for that fill you." He raised his hand.

In a second the lightning would come. Anakin knew that. Why had Palpatine waited? Why had he not let loose the very thing he'd known would destroy Anakin's body? Had he, at the last, decided to keep Anakin after all? Did he still expect Vader to emerge, reborn once more? "Not this time." With a flick of his wrists, as he'd once done with Dooku, he parted Palpatine's head from his body. In his mind came a howl from Vader.

For a long moment, he stood with his head bowed, a bit awed at being alive, then deactivated both lightsabers, tossing Obi-Wan's back to him.

"That's ten, Obi-Wan."

After a brief pause, his former master raised a brow. "I beg to differ, Anakin. That would be nine. Cato Neimoidia *still* doesn't count. It'll never count, so quit trying to slip it in to the number." Obi-Wan knelt by Padmé and touched his hand to her forehead, then quickly turned to Dormé

"Okay, nine." He never really counted Cato Neimoidia anyway. Anakin smiled. It felt good to have some friendly banter once more, even if it was somewhat stiff and awkward.

Padmé began to stir and Dormé... His eyes widened. She was very still, her hands on her lower belly and lips pursed as she panted. Was he seeing things, or was the floor beneath her

wet?

“Ben,” she gasped out. “It’s time.”

Ben?

“Now?” Obi-Wan crouched beside her.

She nodded.

“Right now?”

“Yes.” She made a strangled noise.

Padmé pushed herself onto her hands and knees, then up to a sitting position. Her gaze met his, steady and calm. Anakin flushed and looked away. Alive. She was alive.

“You’re sure?” Obi-Wan put a hand on Dormé’s stomach.

She shot an incredulous stare his direction. “No, I think it’s indigestion,” was her sarcastic reply.

The thought amused Anakin. If she’d eaten the food here, it was a possibility.

“She needs a doctor,” Padmé said, moving closer.

The sound of her voice made him tremble. Four years since he’d heard her. “We’ll find her one.” Turning, he went to a terminal, stepping almost casually over Palpatine’s headless body in the process, and called up a list of doctors. None, he saw, were qualified to deliver a baby — at least in his opinion. After his recent past, it’d be best if this birth went without a single hitch.

If he’d felt scrutinized before descending to the dark side and letting Vader loose, he knew he was going to feel even more so after this ascent back into the light.

## Chapter Fifteen: Babies and Rebels

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Fifteen: Babies and Rebels

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

Notes: Thank you for the reviews!

---

Anakin did a search of the immediate area for any place that might have a medical facility. He sent an annoyed glance in the direction of Palpatine's body. There was nothing out here, as though he'd somehow known that *good* medical care would be needed.

"Anakin," Padmé asked, crouching beside Dormé. "Isn't there a doctor or two on board? Or a med droid?"

He nodded. "There should be a full medical staff, including both doctors and droids."

"Get them."

Now he looked at her, shaking his head ruefully. "Nope."

"Why the blazes not," Obi-Wan snapped, striding to him with a mixture of wariness and anger in his eyes.

"Because they're incompetent," he explained quietly. 'Even if they're still on board, they'd be no help. Imperial medical care is not what Republic care was. It's a huge step down. Standards are low and most respectable doctors chose early retirement rather than work under the restrictions placed upon them. Medical matters can be expensive and Palpatine was a cheap man. He decided sub-standard med droids were good enough for the public, but he cared little for true, genteel care unless it was for himself.' He glanced through the list again. "I wouldn't trust this staff to pull out a splinter. Believe me, Obi-Wan, when I tell you that to bring them in would likely make the situation critical." Besides, he thought silently to himself, Vader had eliminated many of the half-way competent ones during exams.

Dormé began to make strange breathing noises. 'Hee-hee' and 'hoo-hoo' over and over again. She looked miserable.

Anakin tapped the panel with a finger. "There is a mining facility not too far away that could work — a place called Polis Massa —"

"No," Obi-Wan and Padmé answered together and most emphatically. Padmé seemed a little green at the mention.

While Anakin wondered why, he decided that now wasn't the time to ask. "Okay. We have another option. We could point the ship in a direction and do this ourselves while hoping we find a good privately funded facility before the baby comes."

"I want a doctor," Dormé gasped out.

"That may not be poss—"

"Get me one," she growled at him, with a stare every bit as menacing as he knew he himself could produce.

"Okay, but—"

"Now!"

Anakin blinked. And Palpatine had thought Obi-Wan would make a good Sith? Had he ever considered a succession of pregnant women about to give birth? "Sure, Dormé. Whatever you say," he managed in a reasonable tone. "One doctor coming right up."

He considered taking her down to Tatooine, then reconsidered quickly. No way was he letting her give birth on that planet. Bending his head, he applied himself to the task, knowing full well there was no competent doctor nearby. A touch on his shoulder made him pause.

Padmé had come to him, touching his shoulder only long enough to get his attention. "I can direct you to a doctor nearby."

"*Padmé.*" There was a warning in Obi-Wan's voice that Anakin would have to be completely oblivious not to notice.

She turned her head, determination on her lovely features. "We need help, Ben."

"I know that, but you can't."

"We have to. For Dormé."

Dormé panted some more and looked to Anakin as though she wanted to hit someone.

"What if..." Obi-Wan's lips tightened. "What if?" This was repeated with a pointed glance at Palpatine's body.

"What if I've lied again," Anakin interrupted, finishing for him. "What if I would betray you a second time? You don't have to hedge, Obi-Wan. I do understand your worries. That mistake I made cost me everything. I won't repeat it."

"You said yourself the dark side is strong. *Seductive.*"

He'd said truth. Even now, he could feel the pull of Vader inside him. As long as he lived he'd have to fight a war in his own body for control. But he'd come to grips with the necessity. He'd learned the consequences of giving in to his wants and that desire for the easy road. He'd learned the life was hard and sometimes very cruel. The joys made it worthwhile and joy had been missing from his life for a long time. "It is."

Suddenly, explosions sounded and the ship tilted alarmingly.



---

Did she dare let loose her secret? Padmé had just decided to give him the name of a doctor, when chaos descended them. Outside the window, she spied rebel fighters converging upon them. Probably the word had spread quickly that the Emperor was on a lone ship out this way. Of course an attack would be planned and executed, hopes high for an end to the tyrant reputedly onboard.

“Oh, not good,” Obi-Wan said, returning to Dormé’s side and looking rather dejected when she shoved him away, muttering something about it being all his fault. Do something, Padmé. Send them a message or something. They have to stop attacking.”

She joined Anakin at the controls, pleased when he helped her. Their fingers tapped swiftly, but to no avail. The signal was being blocked. No message was going anywhere. “They’re jamming transmissions,” she reported.

“Try it now.” Anakin tapped on the panel to her left, then reached across her to tap another panel.

“Nothing.” His voice was different, she realized, a imitation of what it had been and with a start, she knew his voice box had likely been ruined on Mustafar, requiring surgery and reconstruction. “They’re not letting any possible pleas for help be set loose.”

The ship tilted again.

“We have a bigger problem,” Anakin said low to her. “We need to land and quickly. We’re losing systems like crazy. They’re either making very lucky guesses or they know where to hit.”

Their hands crossed on the panels, Padmé not allowing herself to stop at the touch of their arms and hands, though she wanted to. She wanted to stop and grab on to him; to tell him everything that had happened. She wanted to rejoice that they were both alive. Padmé restrained herself. There’d be time enough later, provided they survived.

“I’m in the way,” she said, suddenly certain in the truth of that statement. He could do this better without her right there. Lifting her hands from the panel, she looked up at him. He was even taller now than he’d been before and she had to crane her neck back.

“Not exactly, but I need Obi-Wan’s experience beside me. Go to Dormé. Obi-Wan and I will take care of this.”

She wavered, then nodded, going to Dormé and kneeling beside her. Anakin knew more about Imperial ships than she did and he and Obi-Wan had been a team for years, while she could be of help to Dormé for the simple reason that she remembered what giving birth had been like. No man, however much he loved his wife, could know the experience.

Holding her friend against her, Padmé reminded her to keep breathing.

---

His wife was glaring at him as though she thought the explosions were all his fault. They weren’t of course, but she was in pain, the slightest jerk adding to that pain. Obi-Wan gladly joined Anakin at the controls. For the past few minutes, everything was his fault and he

suspected that until the baby was born, everything would continue to be his fault for the simple fact that he was male.

“Am I correct in assuming that this is a secondary bridge,” he asked.

“Very much so. Palpatine liked to have a contingency plan, especially on his favorite ship. Everything we need is right—” The panel on Anakin’s left surged bright with electricity. Anakin lifted his hands. “Well, it *was* right here.” Outside the window, they saw escape pods flying off. Alarms clanged.

“Tell me that didn’t make a difference,” Obi-Wan took a position on Anakin’s right, taking over the far controls and finding they were ridiculously idiot-proof. Anyone could fly this ship if need be.

“So you *want* me to lie to you then?”

Dormé began to cry and he glanced back at her. She was shaking her head to whatever Padmé was whispering.

“Just land us, Anakin.” Worry for his wife remained in the back of his mind.

“I’ll try.” Anakin continued to tap at what was left of the controls.

“Try? Can’t you pilot this thing? You can pilot every other ship.”

“Of course I can pilot the ship, but the ability to pilot it is irrelevant.”

They exchanged a glance at the familiarity of the words and Obi-Wan shook his head as Anakin began to give him directions. He recalled another time when Anakin had said nearly the same words. Hopefully this time would end better than that previous one.

---

Piloting *was* irrelevant, Anakin thought as he tried to both guide the ship to a safe landing and manage to open a communications channel. The goal was landing and all he needed to do was keep this hunk of metal moving in a straight line. Finally, there was static and voices. After many tries, they were able to explain the situation. The rebel attack on the ship ceased, ships guiding them down to the surface. Thankfully, it wasn’t Tatooine. That was all he could say on that matter.

They lurched to a stop, Dormé screaming all the while.

Obi-Wan caught his eye. “Another happy landing,” he began, presumably as a preamble to something else, but Dormé interrupted.

“Speak for yourself,” she panted out. “I’m not particularly happy right now. That was some rescue, Ben, crashing the ship. Do you have any more surprises?” Her hair had come loose and right that second, Dormé reminded Anakin of Padmé when she was annoyed. The same expression, the same peeved frown.

“That wasn’t on purpose, my love.”

Her stare indicated she thought otherwise. Anakin reminded himself that she was in pain.

“I want this over with and you’re having all the fun!”

“Fun?” Obi-Wan seemed genuinely confused. For that matter, Anakin was as well. Fun? What fun was she referring to? “How so?”

“You got to kill a Sith lord and pilot a damaged ship and I’m just giving birth! It’s not fair!” She panted harder, then held her breath.

Going to her, Obi-Wan knelt beside her. “Really, Dormé, that was all on Anakin. I had very little to do with it.”

“You have to breath,” Padmé told her.

“Not until I get to do something fun too,” Dormé quickly gasped out and held her breath again. A strange expression crossed her face and Anakin grimaced in sympathy. She was in agony and beneath it all, he sensed her fear. She was afraid of this process of birthing.

“You’re being unreasonable. You can’t simply not breathe. It’s ridiculous.” Obi-Wan was beginning to lose his cool, which surprised Anakin not a little. Obi-Wan was the unruffled one, the calm one.

Dormé scowled at her husband, lips tight together. Anakin winced. He recognized that look as one Padmé had given him on occasion. That look had been a good guarantee he wasn’t going to be sleeping in their bed that night. He stepped beside Padmé, crouching down. Intervention seemed like a good idea. It was a long shot, but he tried a mind-trick anyway. Whether that or simply the tone he used — for he knew Dormé wasn’t weak-minded —, she calmed and quieted, resting in Obi-Wan’s arms until help arrived.

All too soon, Anakin found himself alone with Padmé in the ruined remains of the ship. Well, almost alone. A few rebel guards were nearby, far enough away to keep an eye on them, but not close enough to hear them. He stared at her. She returned the look. Twice he tried to speak and twice he found himself unable to think of what to say, where to begin. There was so much they needed to cover.

Padmé swallowed so hard he heard it clearly. Her lower lip trembled and then, “Anakin, you broke my heart!” As though horrified she’d blurted it out, Padmé began to sob and hurried from the room.

This was going to be a hell unto itself.

## Chapter Sixteen: Cleaning Up

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Sixteen: Cleaning Up

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

---

The reality of standing before him with silence to fill was more than Padmé could bear. She found herself saying the first thing that came to mind. *Anakin, you broke my heart.* How very true that statement was! And yet... his letters in recent times had given her hope for him.

Tears came and when she realized she wasn't going to be able to stop them, Padmé ran from him, out into the hallway and outside. She let herself be directed onto a rebel transport and taken up into a rebel ship every bit as big as Palpatine's ship had been. Once there, she simply told them that she and Dormé had been taken and then rescued by Obi-Wan and Anakin.

She spent time alone, thinking and wondering how this was going to end. She wanted to talk with Anakin like they never had, with complete honesty. At the same time, however, she wasn't certain if they could do it. They'd never been too good at being honest with each other before. What did the future truly hold for them? Could they make a future together? Would this turn of events allow them to? A thought occurred to her that added fresh emotional ill. What if he was found out? What if it was made known that he'd been Darth Vader?

Her stomach churned at the idea and what the consequences could be. He would be either imprisoned or executed as a war criminal. Considering all that Vader had done, execution was likely.

Don't think like that, she told herself. Our lives will change once more and perhaps....

Padmé sighed. Enough of that! What will be will be and there is no point in imagining the worst. There is no point in throwing myself into despair when it's not certain despair is the outcome.

She was given small quarters to rest in and food to eat, then informed that they were headed to Coruscant to tell the Senate of Palpatine's demise. There was no mention of her friends. Padmé ate, showered and changed into fresh clothing provided, then laid down for a nap.

When she woke, Anakin was outside her door.

---

It never ceased to amaze Anakin how people created elaborate stories to explain matters; like how he, Obi-Wan, Padmé and Dormé had been present for Palpatine's death. The story these rebels assumed was amusing, complex, and thoroughly wrong:

Anakin had not been killed at the Temple protecting younglings (as had been bandied about). No, he had followed Obi-Wan to join him in the fighting against the Separatists. Then, when things had shifted against the Jedi, he and Obi-Wan had together urged Padmé Amidala to go into hiding to protect herself and her baby from policies they'd foreseen going into effect against those who'd been Jedi friends.

Padmé had faked her death with the help of those two and Obi-Wan's secret wife Dormé, who had once been a loyal handmaiden to Amidala. After suffering a late miscarriage, Padmé had begun to help the rebel movement, always keeping her face veiled. Dormé fled Naboo to live with her husband in exile until time to topple Palpatine came about.

Anakin, in the meantime, had hidden in plain sight, evidenced by the mentions of his name in such places as the client list of CC Wave. Somewhere along the way, he'd been in an accident that mildly disfigured his features. Thanks to informants, Anakin had known just when to go after Darth Vader, killing him on his ship and stealing his fighter to rendezvous with Obi-Wan.

Unfortunately, Palpatine had found Kenobi's whereabouts and gone to Tatooine to kill him. Upon not finding him home, troops had taken the women to entice Kenobi. From then on, the Kenobi/Skywalker team had worked their magic, ridding the galaxy of the tyrant and incorporating a rescue into their plans. A bright day for the galaxy!

And so, so wrong. However, it surprised him that Padmé, Obi-Wan, and Dormé had not told them how wrong they were. He smiled a little to himself. Dormé and her secret husband. Wrong couple, right idea. Although.... When had Obi-Wan romanced Dormé? Had Obi-Wan been married to her all along? Had he broken the code?

Anakin set aside *that* wondering for later.

The rebels made it all sound logical.

Anakin sat in a conference room, waiting for the next step. They were heading towards Coruscant, where the fate of the galaxy would be discussed. Already, Palpatine was missed, according to rebel talk. News of Palpatine not answering messages was getting out and panic was setting in. The Emperor was never out of communication.

The door opened and a disheveled Obi-Wan came in, taking the chair across from him. He explained, "She made me leave the birthing room. The drugs took effect and she claimed I was in the way. I'm told it will likely be hours yet, that she's progressing as can be expected, and I'll be informed when it's time for me to be there."

Anakin watched him a long moment, studied those familiar features, noting the emotion in Obi-Wan's expression. He loved Dormé like Anakin loved Padmé. That was plain in every mention of her. Perhaps now was the time for that question. "You and Dormé.... Explain that."

Obi-Wan returned his stare, then smiled softly. "I love her."

“There’s no doubt of that, but you married her.” That fact he couldn’t get around. How did proper Obi-Wan go from following the code to marrying a woman? “I don’t understand that, Obi-Wan. You *married* her.”

“Why does everyone say it like that? She’s a beautiful, exceptional woman. *You* married Padmé, Anakin, so I don’t believe you’ve any room to talk.”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

He had him there, didn’t he? “The code forbids it.”

“That didn’t stop *you*. However, there are special cases. *Were*, rather.”

“Are you and Dormé a special case?” He tapped his fingers on the tabletop.

“Well, seeing as how Vader murdered the rest of the Jedi one by one, I would say so.” Drawing a deep breath, Obi-Wan made a noise of exasperation. “Why didn’t you come to me when you realized you wished to marry her, Anakin? Why didn’t you tell me straight that you loved her? I would have helped you. I loved you as a brother and truthfully, I loved Padmé as a sister. I still do. As the Chosen One, there might have been a chance that the Council would have given you a dispensation.”

“A slim chance.”

“But a chance. It was there and you didn’t even pursue it. You could have asked using hypothetical situations. I certainly did that enough over the years.”

“Oh please, Obi-Wan. Do you really think the Council would have let me marry Padmé? They didn’t trust me under normal circumstances, so why would they trust me with a wife? Not to mention, that even if they *had* agreed, there would have been stupid, pointless restrictions, such as I could only marry her once I became a Master.”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps you would have checked your own impulses and attained that status you lusted over.”

Their voices raised, louder and louder. “Perhaps,” he asked, hearing Vader wake inside his mind and begin to whisper. Calm down, he told himself. Concentrate on breathing. He closed his eyes, imagining his airways opening up, visualizing unimpeded air flow inside his body. Calming, cleansing breathes, flushing out his anger and irritation. Doc had told him visualization was fine if it helped. When calm descended, he reopened his eyes. “Tell me, please, how you reconciled yourself with the code.”

Obi-Wan’s eyes narrowed and he nodded. “My exile was a forced retirement, so to speak. I came to love Dormé when she and Padmé came to stay with me. She made me completely crazy at first, but she filled an empty place inside me....” He shrugged. ‘The action was the right one and I’ve not regretted it for one second. Every day is truly an adventure in our house, from her shopping habits to unexpected guests.’ His smile hinted at some private amusement. “I love her and while I *am* a Jedi, the Jedi Order is gone. The future of the Jedi and those who could be trained as such is... clouded. There must be changes for the future and I believe the code needs much revision if the Order is to ever be revived.”

His former friend was watching him closely. Looking for signs of ire? Anakin sat back in his chair. How long until Obi-Wan trusted him again? How long until anyone trusted him again? The idea that it might never occur beat about his mind.

Sadness tinged Obi-Wan's smile. "Be mindful of your thoughts, Anakin. Your anxiety is natural given what has happened between us and our current situation. We'll take each day as it comes, yes?"

Before he could answer, Obi-Wan was summoned to the birthing room.

---

While he didn't particularly care for the process of birth, Obi-Wan wouldn't have missed it. He held their son, unable to think of a single word to describe exactly what it was he was feeling. Pride, joy, relief and more swirled through him in a heady rush. I'm a father, he thought. It's really happened. "He's beautiful," he murmured, stroking a finger along the boy's face and marveling that he and Dormé had brought a perfect baby into the galaxy.

Ten fingers, ten toes and a cry that indicated he had good strong lungs. There was a swirling of dark hair along the back of his head and if he resembled a lizard with his wrinkly, newborn skin, then Obi-Wan didn't really notice. All he noticed was that he and Dormé had a healthy son.

Dormé sipped the water held for her and took his hand in hers. Though utterly exhausted, she was gorgeous to him. "He looks like you," she replied.

"No," he shook his head. "He looks like *you*, my love."

"No, he looks like both of you. Don't start that back and forth nonsense." Qui-Gon had arrived, moving to peer over Obi-Wan's shoulder at the baby.

Obi-Wan gave a glance his direction. "How long have you been here, Master?"

Dormé perked up a bit, letting go of his hand and tugging the sheet up higher. "Qui-Gon? He's here? Where is he, Ben?"

"Looking over my shoulder at our son."

Qui-Gon chuckled, tickling a finger under the boy's chin. "Such a disturbance you, Anakin and Palpatine caused. It was like an explosion, Obi-Wan, with shockwaves rippling outward. I was with Yoda and he and I were both curious as to what had occurred, so here I am and what do I find? A birth and death in one day."

Dormé motioned to the chair. "Well ask him to sit already, Ben. Don't be a bad host."

Qui-gon's grin was amused. "I like your wife Obi-Wan." Obliging, he took a seat. "A fascinating woman. Tell her that I accept and that I've never found her an ungracious hostess even when she'd no idea I was present."

He relayed the message. Dormé beamed from the compliment. "Well thank you. It's always a pleasure to have friends visit."

Soon, Obi-Wan realized Dormé was exhausted, needing rest. She could barely keep her eyes open and their son had already fallen asleep. We'll have to name him soon, he thought,

leaning over to kiss her. “Rest. I’ll be back later.”

Under guard, he went to an observation lounge and sat down to watch space go by. Qui-Gon refrained from speaking until the door had shut, leaving the guards outside.

“Do you trust Anakin?”

“I don’t know. Padmé does. She claims he’s left Vader behind, turned his life around. Frankly, I don’t see how he could go from slaughtering whole planets of people to just being himself again. He fell to the dark side, Master. How do I know that he isn’t using Sith tricks like Palpatine did?”

Qui-Gon sat beside him. “What do your senses tell you?”

“My senses tell me he’s Anakin, the man I knew.”

“Then he is Anakin.”

“But my head tells me he could become Vader in the barest blink of an eye and what have I done? I’ve helped him gain a clear shot to the throne. He could very well go in and claim the throne now, name himself as Emperor.”

“Has he?”

He stroked his beard a moment, then shook his head. “No. He told me to kill him if he attempts to take Palpatine’s place. He said if that happens, then Vader has returned and would not let him have control. It would be kinder to kill him.” When there was no reply, Obi-Wan turned his head. “Master?”

“An interesting choice of words, Obi-Wan. Let him have control? Let us consider the implications of that.” He stood. “I must inform Yoda of this turn.”

Alone, Obi-Wan pondered the words as instructed and was troubled even deeper by his conclusions.

---

In previous times, being alone with Anakin had meant kisses and hugs and gentle expressions of their love for each other. Now was a different matter, for much had changed. Padmé invited him in, served him fruit juice and settled across from him. She clasped her hands in her lap, gaze drinking in the sight of him even as her heart pounded fierce in her chest.

He took a sip of the drink and set it aside. “We need to talk and better we do so immediately on some things.”

“You don’t have to...” Padmé stopped herself. In the past, they’d failed to listen to one another, much like how that first war had begun. She’d not heard his true views there in the meadow and he’d later not heard her true wants. Like willful children, they’d only heard what they wanted to hear.

No more, she decided. He was right. Some things needed to be said immediately, before they were presented to the galaxy as the deliverers from tyranny. She would listen to what he felt he had to tell her.



After a moment, she dipped her head in a hesitant nod. "Go on."

---

Where to begin? Guilt was eating at him over so many things, dining in splendidous gluttony upon him. Anakin didn't know where to even start and so he began with the point that concerned him most. He swallowed a gulping dose of fracturing pride and heaping shame.

"I thought you were dead, Padmé. Please know that. If I'd any inkling you were really alive.... I truly thought you were gone. I even went to your grave."

Her hands kept tightening together in her lap and she was as nervous as he.

Anakin cleared his throat. Best to say it plain. No sugar-coating, though how could he possibly sugar-coat his transgression? "I've been unfaithful to you. I met a woman this past year through a personal ad. We've been corresponding for months. She's been everything I needed: understanding, caring, nonjudgmental and yet so opinionated. She helped me. Norel was a bright spot I looked forward to. Her letters...." He looked down at the floor, not wanting to see the hurt that would be in her eyes. "I even went to Naboo to meet with her."

"Did you?"

"No." Her voice was calm, almost too calm. She had to be thinking he was going to leave her for Norel, didn't she? 'She was unable to make our dinner plans because of a family emergency.' A quick glance at her face confused him. He'd expected to see betrayal and pain on her features and she looked... happy? Anakin knew that expression and there was no mistaking it. Padmé was happy. He gave his head a tiny shake. Had the Sith lightning fried too much of her? "Padmé, I think I love her, but I know I still love you. When Obi-Wan told me you were alive...."

Tears filled her eyes. Finally, he thought. A reaction he expected, something he understood. "Oh, Ani." She covered her mouth with one hand.

"She's very like you. Not in her hobbies, but in her convictions. Norel reminded me so much of you that sometimes I got the two of you confused. I'd find myself picturing you in my head, imagining you there. She never sent an image—"

Padmé laughed and to his mind, it was mildly hysterical.

When she'd quieted somewhat, he asked, "Do you need a sedative," which sent her into fresh... giggles? She was hysterical, wasn't she? Oh great. Obi-Wan and Dormé were going to kill him for upsetting her.

"Anakin, you haven't been unfaithful."

"Yes I was. Weren't you listening?"

"No, you weren't. Trust me. I know Norel."

He went very still. Just what did she mean by that? Alarm flitted through him. "You know her."

"I *am* her."

“No, no. You aren’t her. You don’t sew. You no longer live on Naboo and Norel sews and gardens and lives in the lake country....”

“Well I had to do something, Anakin. I couldn’t exactly run about Theed as myself, could I? I had to retire, to find things to fill up the time. Imagine my surprise when I came across your ad. How could I not write to you? Then you wanted a name and I got tired of writing ‘Waiting’ all the time. The cottage, the hobbies.... It was all me.”

He sat back, stared at her. “You lied to me. You let me think you were dead and pretended to be another woman. The story of your life, isn’t it? Pretending to be one thing when really you’re another entirely....” Breaking off, he swallowed hard. No. He again shook his head. Don’t think like that. That’s Vader twisting this.

Sure enough, if he relaxed his guard he could hear Vader talking, saying those same words, naming her as a liar and traitor.

She couldn’t tell who she was, he thought, not and remain safe from Palpatine. She helped me, risked her life to do so, for if she’d slipped up once.... She wanted to see me. It was her idea to meet. “Were you really there at the resort?”

“Yes, but when I went to the dining room.... I wasn’t ready for a face-to-face after all.”

Sitting forward again, Anakin put his head in his hands. “I sensed you. It wasn’t my imagination. Padmé, I thought I was imagining things. I almost did the same thing you did, leaving a message. I sensed you there and it felt like I was cheating on you. I thought it was just Naboo....”

She slipped from her seat and to the floor in front of him, kneeling and placing her hands on his knees. The movement was tentative, as though she was unsure how he’d react. “But now we’re here. We can start over. I *want* to start over, Anakin.” Emotions skated across her beautiful features, one after another. “Can we?”

He blinked, then covered her hands with his. “Believe me, Padmé, I’d like nothing more, but don’t take this the wrong way. Why do you want to stay with me? I need your reasons.”

“Because I never stopped loving you.”

“I choked you.”

Her gaze lowered from his. “You were in the grip of the dark side. Obi-Wan told me it twists people, changes them—”

“It does and it’s seductive. It would be simple if the dark side was hideous from the start, but it isn’t. It’s slow and seeps inside, coaxing....” He stopped, shook his head. “I’m sorry, Padmé. About the miscarriage.... I’m so sorry that my choking you brought about that kind of pain.”

She pulled away, eyes wide at the apology. “Miscarriage? Nothing else of that story is true, but you believed that part? Oh no, Ani. Our babies have grown into beautiful children. They’re both absolutely adorable.”

“Babies?”

She nodded, smiling wide. “Two. We had twins.” She returned to him, clasping his hands in hers. “Can we see them? Together? You want to, don’t you? We can go see them now. We can —”

“No. Don’t. Not until you hear everything I have to tell you.” Loosing a hand, he stroked a thumb along her lower lip, heartened when she didn’t move. “I would love to see them, but I don’t want to risk them. Vader is greedy, power hungry, bitter and twisted. He’d take our children and twist them.”

“I wouldn’t let that happen.” She didn’t understand, he could see the incomprehension in her eyes.

How could he explain the horrible truth of Vader? “How would you stop him? My anger gives him strength. Don’t misunderstand. I do want to see them, to love them and be a father to them, however late that is in coming. I won’t let the monster inside me taint them.”

“But...” She shook her head. “You’re Anakin. You’re not Vader anymore. It doesn’t have to be that way.”

He hated making her sad so soon after happiness. “Yes it does. They are our hope, a new generation. There must be changes made for the future. You go to them, love them for both of us. When they’re old enough, explain to them. Tell them why I won’t see them. Make sure they know I do it to protect them. Vader can’t know either of them.”

Padmé got up and turned her back, hugging herself. “We’ll never have any more children, will we?”

He shrugged, helpless to comfort her, uncertain if he should hold her. “I don’t know. It would probably be best.”

She nodded. “Would you leave me alone please? I need to think.”

Anakin stood. I’ve messed things up again, he thought. I’ve hurt her. “Padmé.”

“Just go. I need to think about this and I... I can’t do it with you *here*.”

Feeling even worse, Anakin wandered the ship, a guard behind him until he found the observation lounge. He sensed Obi-Wan’s presence, a lingering essence, and sat down. He was not alone long.

“Tell me the truth, Anakin. Tell me what you meant about Vader letting you have control.”

With tears trickling down his face, Anakin finally told Obi-Wan everything.

## Chapter Seventeen: Tangled Web

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Seventeen: Tangled Web

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

Notes: I don't often succumb to writer's block, but this chapter gave me a horrible time!

---

Somehow, once the truth had been given, Obi-Wan wasn't surprised by it. He supposed he should have been, but he wasn't. I should have seen it, he told himself. I should have noticed. "Anakin, how much control do you really have? Be honest."

Wiping his face, Anakin sighed. "More than I did yesterday and the day before and so on. It's like kicking an addiction. I have to take each day as it comes and there are both good and bad days. I am two people: me and him. Sometimes he's easy to ignore and other times I have to fight for control. But," he paused, looking at Obi-Wan, "my doctor has prescribed drugs for the symptoms which seem to help suppress Vader and there are mandatory therapy sessions along with various techniques designed to relieve anxiety and depression. It all comes down to one thing though. I am two people in one body. I'm me, Anakin. I'm also Vader, dark and twisted. I will struggle my entire life with it."

Obi-Wan thought about that. He didn't know much really about the condition. "How does the Force measure in to it? Or does it?"

"I was tempted, Vader was tempted. I was weak and Vader rose. I'm not trying to absolve myself of blame, Obi-Wan. I was wrong and I acted rashly. The easy road was... enticing. For awhile, Vader and I were mixed up together and by the time I realized I needed to back away, I couldn't. He had control and I was just along for the ride. Vader is all of my old hurts and angers and pain. He's my ambition and all the things that the dark side speaks to."

Anakin went silent, but Obi-Wan knew it was only so he could gather his thoughts. This purging of truth went far beyond the current situation. In the hours that had passed there in the lounge, Anakin had dredged up old pains, explaining to Obi-Wan how he'd felt all those years of being a Padawan.

"I am the Chosen One. Vader is the Dark Lord and just as powerful as I. We're dangerous, him and I, but there is a chance we could be reintegrated into one, like we once were. It'll be

slow going and Doc says the process can be very painful, especially when one has unresolved issues right and left like I do.”

The door opened, a head poking inside. “Sirs? It’s time.”

Obi-Wan nodded and stood, pausing on his way to the door when he realized Anakin wasn’t behind him. He turned. Anakin had not moved, remaining seated with a strange expression on a face that had gone ashen. His breaths wheezed and Obi-Wan sensed... panic? Yes, that was panic. “Anakin, are you well?”

The man in the doorway stepped inside. “Sirs? May I be of assistance?”

It was quickly apparent that he wasn’t well. Anakin shook his head, panic worsening, one hand splaying on his chest. “Can’t... breathe...” Fear danced in his eyes.

Obi-Wan wondered at the fear and panic, both growing the longer Anakin gasped. He nodded in the rebel’s direction. “Yes, I believe we do need assistance...” He ended the statement as a question, a query for the man’s name.

“Ceslin.”

“...Ceslin, thank you. The quickest route to the infirmary, please.”

“Medical is one floor up.”

Together, they helped Anakin to the infirmary, Obi-Wan talking softly to him all the while, relating a funny story about Dormé and the Jawas as they walked. At least *he* thought it was funny and it did make Ceslin laugh. Soon Anakin was settled comfortably with an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth. He’d had a panic attack, plain and simple. His coloring perked back up. Finally, he relaxed and briefly removed the mask.

“Thank you. I need you to contact my doctor for me, Obi-Wan. His name is Sonas and he’s on Vader’s ship. Give him an accounting of all that’s happened since earlier. I’d like him to come to Coruscant.” The mask was placed back over his face. His breaths were much better, but he wasn’t going to be leaving the infirmary for awhile.

He trusts me, Obi-Wan thought. He trusts that I will bring his doctor to him. “I’ll do what I can.”

A short while later, he was informing Sonas of the situation.

“You’re Obi-Wan?”

“Yes.”

“And Anakin’s wife Padmé is alive? They’ve already spoken face to face?”

“Yes. Not a long conversation, but a conversation nonetheless.”

“Oh dear. I’ll meet you on Coruscant as soon as I can. Be careful in what you say to him \_\_\_”

“Anakin has apprised me of his condition already. He spent the past few hours doing so.”

Sonas was silent a moment, then nodded. “And his wife?”

"I don't believe she knows as yet." Anakin hadn't spent much time with her.

"Do not answer her questions. I'll do so upon arrival."

The image winked out. Obi-Wan made the necessary arrangements with the rebels. They assumed Anakin needed his doctor for bodily reasons. Obi-Wan didn't see the need to enlighten them.

---

Anakin breathed deeply of the oxygen. There was a tiny bit of medication mixed with it. Nicely calming. Had Obi-Wan known the reason for the panic attack? Had that been grasped? If Obi-Wan thought about it enough, he'd understand. Anakin had entertained sudden thoughts of being recognized as Vader, his imagination taking over until he'd had visions of being executed right there in the Senate chamber.

It wouldn't happen that way, not with Palpatine dead and Vader inside him. Still, the imagining had sent panic scurrying through his veins.

He sighed and began to look for something to distract him. That ended up being quite easy.

Dormé was in the next room. Anakin didn't need to see her to know that. The baby's crying said it all, as did her coaxing voice. Carefully getting up and gathering the tank to take with him, he went to the doorway and peeked in.

She was sitting up in bed, holding the baby and making outrageous promises. "If you go to sleep and quite crying, mommy will make sure you have the softest diapers.... No? Okay, how about new clothes for every day of the week?" She made a noise of frustration. "How about a speeder, huh? I'll buy you a speeder with all the bells and whistles for your birthday."

The baby stopped crying. Anakin laughed.

She looked up, then smiled a bit sheepishly, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Pretend you didn't hear that, okay?"

"Hear what? Bribing a baby, Dormé? And you own child at that."

"If it works," she relied, rocking just a bit. "They keep waking me up every hour or so, but he doesn't seem interested in eating, just crying." She glanced down at the bundle in her arms, then back at him. "Hey, do you want to hold him?"

Though he tried to refuse, using the oxygen and any other thing he could think of as an excuse, Dormé persisted until she had him settle on the edge of the bed with the child in his arms. The baby was light, weighing so little that it was like holding an empty blanket. "He doesn't weigh very much," he commented softly, lowering his voice so as not to disturb the now sleeping infant.

She snorted. "He weighs more than average I've been told and he's big for a newborn. I fed him well." Her voice was loving with the tiniest hint of pride. 'I must have spent the last few months grazing, eating about fifteen little meals a day. Maybe that's why he isn't hungry,' she said with a wry arch of one brow, "I over-fed him inside. Think that could be the case?"

Anakin nodded. "Sure."

She continued as though he hadn't said anything. "I never even considered that I'd get pregnant. Funny isn't it? You'd think both of us would have thought that one through, but something must not have been working right, because here we are: parents. It's the strangest process really, this baby growing inside. Bizarre to see a little hand or foot pressing outward...."

She kept talking, faster and faster. She began with pregnancy and gradually slipped into her marriage to Obi-Wan, or 'Ben' as he'd apparently begun calling himself. Anakin lost track of what she was saying and as long as he nodded or made a little noise now and then, she was content to keep speaking. How did she talk that fast, he wondered? Was it some talent she'd honed or was it natural? He'd never heard anyone speak that fast before. It was amazing. Could anyone learn how to do it?

"Right?" She laughed, then squared an expectant gaze his direction.

"Um..." Was he supposed to answer? How could he when he had no idea what she'd been talking about?

Behind him came Obi-Wan's voice. "Are you feeling better, Anakin?"

"Much." He handed the baby back to Dormé. "Were you looking for me?"

Obi-Wan's eyes glinted with amusement. "Actually, I was. Excuse us, my love. Anakin, they're ready for us now."

Anakin gladly left the oxygen tank and chatty Dormé behind. "Has she always been so talkative," he asked as they made their way to the shuttle. "I don't recall hearing much from her when she worked for Padmé."

"She was working. During work hours she restrained herself, but on private time.... My wife is blessed with the ability to talk without breathing."

"Palpatine could do that, but he never spoke so fast. He simply spoke at long length, like those four hour speeches he used to give as Chancellor. He once had me kneel for over six hours while he raged over some imagined failure. I... *Vader* could barely stand when he was done."

They went up the ramp and found Padmé waiting for them. She'd borrowed clothes from someone and looked very pretty in the green outfit, stunning even in his opinion. Anakin let himself admire her for a few brief seconds, then turned his attention to the rebel in charge. The plan was to inform the Senate of what had occurred and bring out Palpatine's body as proof. There would be discussion, but Anakin didn't need to remain for it if he didn't wish.

Obi-Wan declined appearing in the Senate chamber, as did Padmé. Anakin looked at her again. She met his eyes a moment, blushed, then turned her face away. Interesting reaction, but he didn't have time to ponder it as they landed.

---

He thought he couldn't know their children. Padmé thought otherwise.

Her chat with Dormé had put things in perspective. She couldn't expect to pick up her relationship with Anakin for they had both changed during their time apart, time shaping

them differently than it would have if they'd been together. Dormé advised taking the relationship slowly. Surely Padmé remembered the pace at which Dormé and Ben had inched along learning of each other? Did she really think it wise to jump back in without nice long talks and the like? What basis was physical attraction for a long standing relationship? There had to be more.

As usual, Dormé's council was sound, but made Padmé wistful due to the presence of the still unnamed baby her friend held. She and Ben seemed to be in no hurry to name the boy, still squabbling good-naturedly over the name. As Dormé explained, she wanted to use her father's name 'Tellan', but Ben didn't like it, said it clashed with Kenobi. They were having a marvelous time with the name process and she didn't think it was going to be long before she won the argument.

Padmé privately thought the two were drawing it out because they were sad the pregnancy and birth were over.

She walked about the corridors, now without a guard. Apparently, the rebels had decided she was trustworthy. Her walk did her good as well. The mild exercise gave her a chance to clear her thoughts and formulate a plan of her own. If Anakin thought he wouldn't know his own children, then he was wrong. He was going to know them... even if he didn't know it was them. She thought she could get both the Lars and Organas to agree to visit.

Smiling and pleased with her idea, Padmé found the shuttle that would take them to the surface and settled down to wait.

---

This had to qualify as the most terrifying day of his life.

Anakin walked with the rebels and Padmé and Obi-Wan into the Senate building. He'd been in here many times since Mustafar and each time he'd been in the suit, imprisoned inside Vader. Palpatine had redecorated the entire building in his own tastes, which primarily included copies of ancient Sith statues and the color red.

Their entrance was made as a military maneuver with Palpatine's body being toted along in the center of their group. Word of their arrival spread quickly down the length of the reception hall and into the main chamber. Just inside the entrance to the chamber he felt the surge of Vader rising inside him.

*Look at them, Anakin. Don't shut me out yet. Listen to me. They're begging for guidance, all of them. It's natural they look to us. The rebels, the empire. All looking to us. Anakin Skywalker, legend and Chosen One, beloved by a galaxy. The returned hero, delivering them from cruel tyranny.*

As the group moved forward, Anakin glanced up. So many systems represented, all under Palpatine's order. Ready for a new leader.

It could be me, he thought.

Us, Vader whispered.

I could make this galaxy...



*...what I want it to be.*

He shuddered as his thoughts coincided with Vader's, so violently that two men moved to restrain him.

"I'm fine," he told them, assuring them he wasn't having convulsions, only an attack of nerves. But was he fine? Vader prowled beneath the surface of him, unceasing in his cajoling promises, sensing that old weakness of Anakin's: power.

What did the dream of power lose me, he asked.

*Nothing*, Vader returned. *Padmé is alive and we're looking better than ever.*

We may look fine, but inside we're more than messed up.

*Says who? That quack doctor? Obi-Wan? Padmé?* Vader practically spit out both their names.

I say and no one else.

Anakin looked up again, noticing startled glances from those near this level. He was certain he'd finally been recognized as Vader, but no, he began to hear 'Skywalker' whispered until those whispers became confused murmurs ringing the room and echoing.

As he stepped up to Palpatine's usual box, he realized for the first time the full extent of Palpatine's Sith persuasion upon the Senate. He'd enchanted them all, for lack of a better word to describe it. He'd bent their minds one by one and once done with them, he'd turned on them and left them powerless and unable to fight back. When the truth had surfaced, it had been too late for them.

He waited until quiet descended, then announced in a loud voice, "The Emperor and Darth Vader are dead. Palpatine's body has been brought with us to be viewed. Upon his death... there is no heir."

*Do it, Anakin. Take control. Tell them we'd be glad to lead them into a new age.*

"This Empire is dissolved. Govern yourselves." He gave the box to the rebel leaders that had come with them and strode towards the doors.

Would the Senate recover? Would the galaxy? Eventually, yes, and he would not have anything to do with it. He'd tasted the kind of power Palpatine had lured him with and that Vader kept pressing at him and found it bitter ashes. What use was unlimited power when you lost everything dear in the process?

Head high and a smile lingering, Anakin left the Senate to its own ends.

---

Sonos waited directly before the doors to the Senate chambers. He'd arrived as quickly as possible, positioning himself in the main line of sight and asked the two waiting to stay on the side. He'd hoped to have a few minutes with all of them before Anakin went in to the Senate chamber, but that hadn't occurred.

Padmé was afraid. He'd seen the glint of fear in eyes that were every bit as pretty as Anakin had described. She wondered and worried what could be wrong with her husband that he'd have his doctor brought in.

"You're not a general physician, are you," she'd asked, and he'd not given her a full answer. He'd had time to consider this during his traveling. They needed to have joint sessions with Anakin — counseling — to work through buried issues, though if Anakin had told Obi-Wan so much already, those two had a good start on the road to recovering their friendship.

It was Anakin's relationship with Padmé that worried him.

From all he'd been told, Sonas had formed a view that was not favorable. As a boy, Anakin had latched on to her as a mother substitute, having just left his mother for an uncertain and undoubtedly frightening future. He'd not forgotten Padmé over the next decade, turning her in his thoughts, putting her up on a pedestal as a perfect angel. On meeting her again, he'd been ripe for the feminine affection Padmé herself still held for him. His thoughts on her had shifted. He desired her and yet, according to his understanding of the Jedi Code he'd sworn to live by, he could not fulfill that desire. She was out of reach. Anakin wouldn't accept that, risking all to have her in a legal marriage, bound to him so that she could never leave him.

But she had left, and now to find she had not died after all?

Oh, the issues from that alone!

Then, there was Padmé herself. On the outside, she was well adjusted. However, her actions hinted at personal fears and doubts, wants and longings that she'd had suppressed. After all, she had ignored the killing of a tribe of Tusken Raiders and proceeded to marry Anakin while knowing there would be pain if they were found out.

Anakin had filled him in on her life, how young she'd been upon entering the political arena. She'd had little of a true childhood, being an exceptional and extremely intelligent girl. Padmé had been thrust into an adult world long before she should have been for normal development, leaving her stunted in personal growth. It was taxing for a child to behave as an adult, many sacrifices made on personal levels. Padmé hadn't had the time for the emotional rites of passage most teenagers went through until she and Anakin had met again. She'd fallen into teenaged infatuation and called it love, just like Anakin.

Sonas sighed. He supposed the two could honestly love each other. He'd need to observe them interacting with each other to form a more accurate picture of them — which he planned to do. He allowed that he could be seeing their relationship in entirely the wrong light and for Anakin's sake, he fervently hoped he was.

Anakin strode from the Senate chambers and paused on seeing him, his lips stretching into a wide grin. "I did it, Doc! I ignored the lure! He was trying to convince me and I... I shut him out!" His laugh was nearly giddy with happiness.

"I'm very proud of you, Anakin. You've come a long way in the past months."

Anakin's head turned as he caught sight of his wife and friend off to the side. The smile faded just a bit. "Well, that's done. What do we do now, Doc?"

Motioning for Ben and Padmé to join them, he outlined his plan to them all. Individual and joint session counseling, a ‘friends and family’ approach to Anakin’s condition. He’d still meet with Anakin alone, but also Padmé and Ben alone in order to smooth out transition wrinkles. He didn’t think Anakin needed too much change too quickly. They all needed eased back together, with a good dosing of joint counseling sessions. He would prefer it if all would settle on Coruscant for the first few months for easier meeting.

They agreed to a group session in one week.

---

He dealt with the mind. Padmé mulled that over a moment, then looked at Ben. He was suspiciously calm and accepting. “You know what Anakin’s condition is, don’t you? You already know.”

His head dipped in a slow nod. “Yes. Anakin and I had a long talk on the way here.”

Why hadn’t Anakin said anything to her? They’d talked. He could have mentioned he was ill. Padmé bit her lip, chewed it a moment. She considered what he’d said in those letters. Not once had he indicated he had something seriously wrong with his brain that would require his doctor with him. She knew about the SAD, of course, but this? What exactly hadn’t Anakin told her? Worry rose inside her for all the things she knew possible. There were so many things that could happen to the brain alone. “Tell me.”

Ben’s gaze was apologetic. “I’m sorry, Padmé. Anakin wishes to tell you himself. I cannot. It’s not my place to do so.”

She crossed her arms. “You’d tell me he tuned to the dark side, but you won’t tell me this? At least tell me if it’s life threatening.”

“Padmé.... Don’t. Your politician word tricks will not make me tell you. I can say nothing.”

With a glance towards the door, she swallowed hard. His refusal to say anything did not calm her worries. “He’s dying, isn’t he?” It made sense in a way. His refusal to see their children, to have *her* tell them he loved them. Using Vader as an excuse. Oh, Ani, she thought. Have I found you only to lose you?

Exasperation crossed Ben’s features. He relented enough to say, “No, he’s not dying. You’re overreacting. Listen to what he has to say.”

Before she could ask more, Anakin came from the chamber. He was pleased by what had occurred, greeting his doctor with enthusiasm. Padmé let a wistful smile turn her lips. The last time she’d seen Anakin so happy was....

Padmé shook her head. There would be many more happy moments in the future if she had anything to say about it. When Sonas called them over, she made certain she was as committed as Anakin for whatever was needed. Individual meetings? Fine. Couples counseling? Wonderful. Group sessions? When can we begin?

Anakin took her hand, squeezed it gently.

She smiled up at him, pleased to see some of the worry that had taken root in his eyes disappear.

We can do this, she decided. We *will* do this.

## Chapter Eighteen: New Journey

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Eighteen: New Journey

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

Notes: Again, many thanks to those who have reviewed.

---

The building was familiar only in that Anakin vaguely remembered Vader buying it and taking malicious pleasure in offering less to undercut Palpatine's bid on the building. He'd then claimed he'd no idea his Master was bidding as well. As a consequence, Vader had been left kneeling for three hours while Palpatine raged about *that* infraction. However, when the entire security system needed upgrading along with other repairs, Palpatine had told him 'better you than me'.

Anakin toured the building. In honor of having disposed of Vader, he was being gifted with one of Vader's buildings and pressed to accept an income as well. Quite generous when he'd expected nothing. He'd tried to get them to give the income to Padmé. Instead, they'd offered her one as well. Padmé had been surprised and accepted it for a short term only. Obi-Wan had outright declined, claiming Dormé's personal wealth would suffice. It seemed that her father had left her a sizable monetary estate. Not only that, but she had saved her wages over the years. They had no need of extra.

This building would do, he decided. It was in a prestigious area of Coruscant and the rents would be a substantial sum, more than enough for his and Padmé's needs. Once the rents began to build a bit — the actual income part of them — he'd decline the income offer and live solely from the rents. The top floor of the building was split into two apartments he remembered, both empty because Vader had claimed landlord privilege. Not that Vader ever lived in the building. It had been an investment, his first real venture into real estate. After this building, Vader had become bolder, buying up properties as fast as they came on the market until realtors came to him with new offerings as often as they went to Palpatine. Vader had amassed one-eighth of Coruscant into his ownership in months.

Those two apartments would be perfect for him and Padmé.

The elevator opened into a hall with a door to the left, a door to the right and a wide window across from it. The hall was undecorated. The rooms of the apartments were airy,

with lots of light, a common verandah and shared landing pad. He thought Padmé would like it.

As it turned out, she *did*, setting herself immediately to the task of decorating the two spaces. Her only restriction on his space was the need for warm toned colors, as such shades were uplifting and good for his moods. She used furniture with simple lines paired with sumptuous fabrics, pieces of artwork here and there and had architectural detail added to the rooms. The end result was all he could have wished for.

Did Padmé have a new calling as an interior designer? He thought so.

She used lighter versions of the shades in his apartment for hers, so that anyone walking from one to another would find the spaces blended together. There were mild echoes of her Senatorial apartment, but these rooms here were all her. There was no need to impress anyone with the decorating, just her personal tastes.

It reminded him of her parent's home. Padmé, he realized, was very much like her mother. When he made a comment of that, she'd paused, looked around, then laughed, obviously delighted by the comparison. Within the week, they were both set up in well-appointed rooms. It never ceased to amaze him what wealth could accomplish.

Padmé began to shop for clothing, spurred on by Dormé's own race to amass replacements for everything that had been lost in the torching of the house on Tatooine.

Anakin walked across the verandah and waited for Padmé to ask him inside the apartment. She'd told him repeatedly he didn't have to wait, to just walk inside, but he persisted in the polite query each time. She called to him and inside, he saw she was in relaxed clothing today, a loose blue robe with pretty designs around the neckline, and her hair was unbound. Padmé was sitting on the divan, piles of fabric swatches laid out on the table in front of her. He sensed hesitation and sadness, the same things he'd sensed from her all week.

Several times the past week, he'd thought she was going to say something, but she never had, remaining silent instead, the feelings he sensed remaining. He'd known they needed to talk in-depth and put it off, going over and over what he needed to tell her.

She patted the divan beside her, barely glancing up from the swatches. "I can't decide on the fabric. I like the blue, but the purple is just as pretty."

"Get them both." He liked the shades she'd indicated and made a mental note to order a couple more tunics in matching shades from Lanis.

"You think so?"

"Sure." He watched her for a minute, then reached out and took her hand in his. "Padmé, we need to talk." He thought he was finally ready to tell her all of it.

She stilled, swallowing hard. Her hand trembled in his. When her voice came, it was low and quivered. "You're dying aren't you?"

Her words stunned him for a couple seconds. Dying? "What? You think..."

"Just tell me, Anakin." She turned to face him, her face a mask of sorrow. "I can take the truth. Tell me how much time you have left."

How did she come to that conclusion? He didn't recall saying anything that would support it. "I'm not—"

"You don't want to see our children, you've been holding me at arms length the past week.... I understand —"

"No, you don't." He raised his other hand, stilled her words with fingers drawn in gentle swoops across her lips. "Hush a moment. I'm not dying, Padmé. Where did you get that idea?"

She blinked, turning her face so that his hand cradled her cheek. "Your doctor said he was a doctor for the mind. The mind is the brain. You needed him there, so I...." Padmé glanced at her lap. "It made sense, though.... Obi-Wan told me I was being ridiculous, but he refused to explain."

"I'm not dying. Put that from your mind. I ceased dying the day...." He stopped. How to explain this to her so she'd really understand? Inspiration hit him and he snatched up two of the fabric samples she'd been looking at. One dark, one light. He laid the light one on top of the dark. "Okay, I'll start here."

Padmé cocked her head, frowning.

"This is me."

Her gaze dropped to the fabric and back up. "The fabric is you?"

"Yes. The light is me and the dark is Vader. For years this was us, Vader inside and me outside. But then," he slid the dark out, overlapping the light, "he got stronger. I let him grow and help me cope with situations and he pushed me behind him, covered me over."

She nodded slowly. "Uh-huh. He covered... you."

Anakin slid the dark over the light completely. "This is how it was with Vader in control, Padmé. I was there, but I wasn't *there*. Now, I began to reemerge." He set the swatches side by side. "I had to wrestle with him for awhile, but I took control back." The light was back on top and Padmé had a slightly glazed, uncomprehending expression in her eyes. Had he forgotten something? Anakin thought over what he'd just said. No, he'd mentioned everything....

"Anakin, *what* are you talking about? What does this... illustration," she motioned to the fabric, confusion in her voice, "have to do with not dying? And Vader in control...?" Her brows raised.

Oh yeah. He *had* forgotten something important. He sighed, running a thumb over the soft velvety fabric in his hand. It was so embarrassing to say out loud. "I have two personalities. Vader is the second personality. I'm the core, the original, personality. My doctor thinks that Vader was always there, but didn't really being growing until my mom died. The stress and then the added stress there at the end.... And the dark side, twisting, becoming one with us, blurring the edges."

"Oh." She set the swatches with the rest and shrugged. "Why the big long explanation? Why not simply say it?"

“Because it’s embarrassing.” His voice came out very small and nearly a whisper. Anakin’s heartbeat was a hard pounding in his chest. “I wasn’t strong enough to keep him inside. I let him out and he hurt so many people, including you.”

“You let him? You weren’t strong enough? Ani, listen to yourself. I may not know much about the condition, but I do know it’s not something you could have controlled. Events out of your control put stress upon you that contributed, right? It’s nothing to be ashamed of! It’s a medical condition.”

“It’s not only a medical condition. Maybe it would have been if I wasn’t strong in the force. Sonas thinks the dark side complicated matters in several ways. What should have been diagnosed and treated ended up swallowing me whole, taking over everyone and everything around me.” Now he returned his gaze to her. Padmé was not frightened or disgusted. She wasn’t looking at him any differently with this new knowledge. The realization calmed his racing heartbeat. “I need your support in my treatment.”

“Of course.”

“It won’t be easy. We’re going to try reintegration, which means Vader and I will be forced back into one personality. Doc says the process could be years in the going.”

Padmé grasped his hands in hers. “You’re my husband, Anakin. I’ll support you.”

---

It had been a mistake not to talk with him immediately. She’d spent so long the past week agonizing and wondering and worrying about talking to him that if she’d just cornered him this would have been settled. Stupid. She’d been stupid, fearing he’d validate her conclusion. Padmé’s lips twisted with disgust at herself as she dressed to go with Anakin to his appointment. Let that be a lesson to her. Next time there’d be no worrying, or agonizing, or putting off the inevitable talks. Just sit down and do it. She should have learned *that* long ago.

Anakin wanted her to go with him to his appointment and spend some time getting to know Sonas before the group meeting. So far, she didn’t have a good opinion of the man. Pompous, arrogant, condescending, although she would allow that he seemed competent enough. He’d managed to settle into a diagnosis and treatment and Anakin liked him.

She settled on an up-do for her hair, snatched up her shawl and headed across the verandah to Anakin’s apartment. He greeted her, wearing the most colorful outfit she’d seen on him yet. He wore a green she was certain was supposed to be ‘spring green’ but missed it by being far too loud for that shade. Padmé smothered a wince and was amused when he insisted she take his arm the way Ben and Dormé did.

An hour later, her opinion of Sonas had deepened to include intense dislike. Maintain separate residences? Take the relationship slowly, as if not married? Don’t rush matters and most of all: no unapproved therapy techniques or meetings. He’d looked at her with a steady stare, like he knew her plans for Anakin to meet their children.

As if she’d compromise his recovery.

Where had Sonas gotten such an absurd idea? Really. She had, after all, been writing letters to Anakin long before Anakin had begun seeing the man. She’d helped him in his



initial recovery. To think that she'd sabotage it and have Vader tripping about was ridiculous. Vader was a psychopath. She'd much rather have Anakin.

Irritated far beyond belief, she muttered under her breath all the way back to their building, ignoring the amused glances Anakin kept giving her. His amusement only irritated her more and by the time they reached the hallway between their doors, she'd had enough.

---

"Maintain separate residences," Padmé grumbled for the hundredth time since leaving the office. She made a miffed noise low in her throat, then another, only louder.

"Relax. The entire floor is ours. You said yourself they're like one apartment."

"But they're not, Anakin. They're two. Two apartments and he acts like we're some young, irresponsible couple who doesn't know each other at all, when in reality we're several years married."

She'd been muttering under her breath all the way home, working herself into a state of temper. It was... cute. Anakin winced a little at the thought. She'd hate to hear him call her fit of temper 'cute'. Privately, he thought she wasn't so much upset by Doc's restrictions and suggestions as she was by the idea that she couldn't argue with him and win. He'd not been moved by any of her arguments, though Anakin himself had been impressed by a couple of them. In the end, Doc had reiterated that his orders were for Anakin's best, that they as a couple had far too many issues to work through before moving in together would be a remotely good idea.

She opened her door, sighed and crossed her arms. Uh-oh. Defensive posture. That wasn't good. "You agree with him." It wasn't a question.

Slowly, he nodded. "I do. See, I've learned how to apply all those anger management techniques and such to imperial life as a single man, but I need to learn to apply them to us and having friends again. If I jump in to us, I tempt Vader and I don't want to hurt you again."

The irritation reflected on her features melted away into nothingness. Leaning against the wall, she replied, "I wish things could be like they were in the beginning of us."

Anakin shook his head. "No, you don't."

"Why not?"

"Because that would mean I haven't changed and you don't want that, Padmé. It would mean that Vader is always a heartbeat beneath my surface and that I will forever be the impetuous angry youth I was. If you want that, then you'll be disappointed in the man I've become."

She tilted her head and unfolded her arms, moving the fabric of her shawl about restlessly. "You're so serious, Ani. I meant our love. The fire of it, the passion and those days when we had no real worries."

He laughed softly. "Oh, we had worries, we just didn't face them like we should have. I know what you mean though. Picnicking in meadows, frolicking about." He stepped

backwards until he was at his own door. "I'm going to woo you, milady, and this time.... This time we'll know each other well." He left her there, closing his door behind him.

Anakin leaned against it and smiled. Did he ever have plans to woo her!

Operation court Padmé, phase one, would begin in the morning.

---

For some reason, Anakin's pronouncement sent heat flooding her body and Padmé fanned herself with one hand. So he planned on wooing her, did he? Well, she needed a certain wardrobe for that.

"Oh," she whispered, hand touching her mouth and then laying flat on her chest a moment. "I have to shop."

She couldn't be courted in the clothes she had. Such an occasion called for romantic clothes — the better to seduce her husband with. Padmé contacted Dormé and found her friend eager to shop, even if she was exhausted and running on an hour of sleep. They left the still unnamed baby with Ben and made an afternoon and evening of it.

Her aching feet and growling stomach when they were done were worth it. The pretties she had in these bags would show Anakin just how willing she was to be wooed.

---

Obi-Wan contemplated his son's sodden bottom with a long sigh. Dormé had hurried out the door before he could ask her to change it. She disliked changing diapers as much as he did. They had a system going now for turns. However, Dormé foisted the chore off onto him as often as she could. Obi-Wan didn't begrudge her that. After all, she did have to feed the boy. She'd recently dubbed herself the 'baby chow factory'.

"You do realize that most parents name their children *in* the birthing room, right Obi-Wan?"

Turning his head, he noticed Qui-Gon leaning against the wall beside him, his arms crossed. He was smiling affectionately at the sight of Obi-Wan with the baby. Obi-Wan returned his attention to his son, only to notice the boy had wet the table in the short moment he'd turned his glance elsewhere. Quickly, he diapered him, set him in his carrier and cleaned up the mess. "We're having a slight amount of trouble deciding upon a name we both like."

"Choose one. You can always use a nickname for him that is completely unrelated to his real name. Problem solved. This is not difficult. You've had months already to decide."

As if choosing was easy. Qui-Gon had surely observed enough of Dormé to realize that arguing with her was an event that could take days. "Have you ever tried to name a child?"

Qui-Gon's smile turned enigmatic, hinting towards things Obi-Wan didn't know about him and likely never would. Intriguing. "Perhaps."

He raised his brows, hoping for clarification of that answer, yet was unsurprised when he received none. "We'll name him one of these days."

“Before his first birthday, I trust?”

Obi-Wan picked up his son and went to find one of the bottles Dormé had left. When Padmé had contacted her, she’d hurried to be ready to leave, gleeful to be with an adult aside from him. Qui-Gon followed.

“How is Anakin these days?”

“You could easily see him for yourself.” In seconds he had the bottle ready and was settling on the couch to feed the boy. When Qui-Gon didn’t answer immediately, Obi-Wan looked up. He found Qui-Gon troubled, his brow furrowed and all humor gone. “What?”

“I *have* seen him.” He sat, sighed. “Has he told you he has nightmares? I was there last night. He woke gasping, trying to scream. He saw me and *did* scream. I didn’t stay to reassure him.”

“What troubles you about that?”

Qui-Gon shook his head. “It’s not the nightmares or him seeing me that troubles me, Obi-Wan. It’s the fear I sensed in him. Anakin still has a tremendous amount of fear inside him and fear, as you know, is a conduit of the dark side.”

Their conversation stalled, then turned to lighter topics, but the words stayed with Obi-Wan. He fervently hoped they were not an omen of things to come.

## Chapter Nineteen: Back to Life

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Nineteen: Back to Life

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

Notes: Thank you so much for the reviews and compliments! The backstory pertinent to a part of this chapter has already been posted — the story ‘I Feel Pretty’. FYI — I will be on vacation next week, so unless I remember to add a chapter before I go, an update will have to wait until I get back. I’ll be gone several days.

---

Two weeks after Palpatine’s death, Padmé took a trip to Naboo to see her family. She wasn’t certain what sort of reception she could expect. Though she’d tried to keep herself out of the spotlight, the fact that she was alive had been leaked and it had been all over the news reports. Ready or not, she had to see her family.

From reputable papers: “Padmé Amidala alive and working to restore Democracy!” ‘Amidala’s efforts to save the galaxy!’ “Skywalker, Kenobi and Amidala — what a team!”

And from the tabloids: “Amidala reunited with former lover and living in penthouse palace.” “My life in hiding — an exclusive interview.” Not that she’d spoken to anyone from *that* particular paper. It didn’t stop them from publishing the fictitious accounting however, which she was amused to note, included secret meetings with Anakin and regular sojourns together to the grave of their child. Children and still living, but the media didn’t know that. How very not secret their meetings during the Clone Wars had been!

Her family had undoubtedly seen or read at least one of the many reports. She went alone, promising to be back in time for the reception being held in their honor. Upon arrival on Naboo, she was disappointed to find no one waiting to meet her transport. She felt slapped, the air punched from her lungs, stopping to find a private place and have a good cry. Her tears lasted for nearly half an hour.

Padmé patted cool water on her face. “Well,” she whispered to herself, “I did deceive them for nearly five years, letting them think I was dead. They feel hurt, betrayed, angry. I understand completely.” Still, she had trouble convincing herself that she understood. With a body that trembled from emotion, she walked to her parent’s house and was disappointed further when no one answered the door. Once, she would have walked in. Now, she felt strange in doing so.

With a sigh, she opened the door and stepped inside.

“Surprise!”

The front room was filled with people. She glimpsed family, former handmaidens and anyone her family knew she’d considered a friend. Padmé stood unmoving in the doorway, unable to think of a single thing to say. Her emotions welled once more. The room quieted, smiles on faces slipping away. Her mother moved towards her, enfolding her in a warm hug.

“Welcome home,” she whispered in Padmé’s ear.

Padmé’s tears came anew. “No one met me! I thought—”

“What do you mean no one met you? Sola? Where are they?” Her mother’s expression shifted, became concerned. “We sent Ryoo and Pooja, Padmé. They couldn’t wait to see you. They talked for hours about what they were going to tell you first. I can’t understand where they got to. They promised not to dawdle.”

Sola left and quickly returned, joining them, also hugging her, though their mother had yet to let go. “They stopped to buy a gift, got turned around and were waiting in the wrong place.” Which probably meant that they’d actually run into friends and lost track of time.

“How could you think we wouldn’t send someone to meet you?” Her mother was hurt by the idea and Padmé quickly sought to smooth over her mistake.

“I’m sorry, mom. I’ve been —”

“Emotional,” Sola interrupted. “You must be so tired from keeping silent. I can only imagine how stressful staying away has been for you.”

The rest of her visit played out in a similar fashion. Once details about her life after her ‘death’ were revealed and reasons put forth, she found most people quite willing to return to friendship and play ‘catch up’. She even spent hours telling her parents and sister the truth of her relationship with Anakin. Sola had that ‘told you so’ gleam in her eyes when Padmé mentioned the secret marriage and both Sola and their mother then turned that same glance to her father when he’d asked ten times in a row if her pregnancy had really been legal. He was greatly relieved to learn she’d been married the entire time.

Padmé left for Coruscant two weeks later far more relaxed than she’d been in a long time. She’d promised to bring Anakin back openly, as her husband, though how was she going to admit the fact to the galaxy at large? Easily, she realized, since Obi-Wan and Dormé freely admitted their marriage. She and Anakin had nothing holding them back from confessing their own marriage.

In the political area, she distanced herself. She didn’t want to get sucked in again and have to suffer disappointment if the New Republic idea didn’t work out. What could she do instead of political service, however? She already knew that hobbies didn’t work out so well.

She thought about it as she readied herself for the reception, finally dismissing any plans in order to concentrate on preparing herself. This party had started out as a small reception and since she’d been gone, had grown to include dinner, dancing and entertainment, not to mention having been moved to several different locations as the guest list had increased. It seemed everyone wanted to see them.

Anakin was nervous when she met him in the hallway, tugging at his tunic and cloak and looking every bit a Jedi in his outfit. Well, except for the color. While his pants were a tan shade, the rest of the outfit was turquoise and his cloak the shade of brown Obi-Wan usually favored. "I look fine, right," he asked.

Padmé smoothed her own elaborately embroidered white dress. "You look great, Anakin."

His gaze did a long tour of her. "And you look as beautiful as you always do." He held out his arm. "Shall we? Dormé and Obi... Ben are downstairs waiting."

She smiled. He was trying so hard to remember Obi-Wan's name change. Half the time he forgot and the other half, he'd remember as he said his name and end up scrunching the two together. Sliding her arm through his, she let him lead her into the elevator.

---

Obi-Wan was bored. He didn't particularly like these sort of parties and keeping track of his wife was becoming difficult. She'd found old friends and promptly discovered more. When he told her he was going to get a drink, she'd nodded distractedly, completely engrossed in whatever former handmaiden Eirtaé was telling her, though how she could hear what the woman was telling her when she herself never stopped talking was beyond him. He simply chalked it up to one of the great wonders of the galaxy. Obi-Wan only vaguely remembered Eirtaé and he couldn't remember if Dormé had ever worked alongside her.

He ordered his favorite cocktail, then wandered the gathering awhile, pausing to watch Padmé and Anakin mingle with the guests. Padmé was in her element, greeting people as though she remembered each and every one of them. Perhaps she did, he reflected. As a Senator, she'd known quite a lot of people. Anakin wasn't enjoying the affair any more than he, barely managing to conceal his boredom. Obi-Wan wondered with high amusement how well Vader had enjoyed such parties. Had he made faces beneath the mask, annoyed at having to attend?

Anakin looked his way and grimaced, then sighed and returned his attention to the dignitary before them.

Obi-Wan continued walking, finished a circuit of the room and suddenly saw a familiar face from the past. His eyes widened. It was the distant past, yet how could he forget that face? Well, well, well. Whatever was Baron Gorash doing here? He recalled that while he and Anakin's part of that mission had succeeded, the second half of the mission long ago to the Baron's ball had not produced the proofs needed to incarcerate him. He'd gone free.

Curious, he followed the Baron, unsurprised to see him on the arm of a tall blond woman who held a remarkable resemblance to Anakin. Amused, he noted that while she wasn't as busty as they'd made Anakin appear, she wasn't far behind those measurements. The couple parted company just inside the door, the Baron helping himself to some punch and making his way towards Anakin and Padmé.

This, he sensed, was going to be interesting. Would Anakin remember him?

---

Anakin was ready to leave. Never mind that they hadn't been served dinner and the reception had barely begun. He was bored. Glancing around, he saw Obi-Wan had left Dormé's side and had a drink in his hand. Bring me one, he thought at him, hoping Obi-Wan would take his grimace as a hint to do just that. He could use one of those blue drinks his friend liked so much. He'd learned during the Clone Wars the sort of punch the mixed drink could bring about and thought he could use a little tipsiness to get him through the next few hours. But no, Obi-Wan instead turned and walked away. Anakin wondered if he'd really seen a smirk on Obi-Wan's lips as he'd turned.

He smothered a yawn, listening with only half an ear to Padmé's conversation with the dignitary. What was his name? Anakin couldn't remember and didn't bother trying. The incoming guests were more interesting than the conversation. He saw Bail Organa arrive alone. Where was Organa's wife? Had she come with him and would arrive later? Or was she still back on Alderaan? Anakin started to point out the man's arrival to Padmé, thinking she'd want to see her former ally in the Senate, when she caught his attention to the next guest in line to see them.

"Anakin, this is Baron Gorash. He was one of my supporters before the war."

He looked down at the familiar man, trying to figure out where he'd seen him before. Vague memories of having conversations with him came to him, but he didn't quite....

"It's a pleasure to meet you. May I say, you look very familiar." The Baron was peering up at him with a frown.

Anakin nodded, making a noncommittal noise. He knew they'd met before, but where? And under what circumstances?

Padmé threaded her arm through his. For a brief second, her expression indicated she thought Baron Gorash was a complete idiot. "Well, Anakin was featured prominently in news reports during the Clone Wars."

Gorash shook his head. "No, no. That's not it. Have you relatives on Floxycintilaria? A sister or cousins?"

"Floxy...?" Padmé's brows rose and she looked at Anakin.

He looked back. Oh yes, *now* he remembered Gorash. Ashy. He felt a hot flush creeping up his cheeks. That was a story he'd rather forget. "No, Baron. I'm sorry, I've never been to Floxy..." It wasn't a lie. He remembered making up the planet, so he couldn't have ever been there.

"Floxintilaria. A tiny planet, very hard to find. The people there are gender switchers, you know. I met the most delightful young woman from there years ago, but she simply disappeared from my life."

Anakin's smile felt pasted onto his face. "I've never heard of it."

Obi-Wan joined them. His big grin would have made a Wookiee nervous. "Hello, Baron. How have you been? Well, I trust?"

Thankfully, Obi-Wan led the man away.

"What was that all about," Padmé asked, curiosity in her eyes.

“Oh, nothing.”

“Nothing?” She laughed. “By the look on your face, I somehow doubt that.”

She dropped the subject, for which he was glad. He didn’t particularly wish to tell her the tale here. Maybe later.

---

It was her! Him, rather. Gorash knew it in his bones. Anakin was his Ani, his gender changing warrior prince/princess. For days after his ball, he’d had only vague memories of the tall woman, memories that had gradually sharpened until he’d remembered her... uh... him.

Of *course* the scarring on his face didn’t change matters. Ani was still attractive, but now Gorash was quite confused. Anakin Skywalker was a Jedi, which meant he’d been a Jedi back then.... Or had he? Gorash didn’t know how the Jedi thing worked. He’d never been interested enough to find out. Nor had he paid much attention to pictures of Kenobi/Skywalker during the war, uninterested in them except to note that they were doing a good job. To see Anakin up close though! It was his Ani. Was Ani still heir to the throne? Had the fortune been wiped out in the war? How *did* his Ani become Anakin Skywalker? Oh, he wished he’d paid more attention to reports back then!

I don’t understand, he thought, letting the bearded man lead him away. “I’m well, I suppose, though....”

“Confused,” the man finished for him.

“Yes,” he admitted, nodding. “You’re familiar as well, sir. Are you...? I mean to say, you were Ani’s guardian?” He couldn’t help the hope swelling inside him.

The man’s eyes twinkled with good humor. “Ben Kenobi.” His lips stretched into a wide smile. “As you have surmised, Baron, Ani’s plans changed drastically after we left you.” He stroked his beard with forefinger and thumb.

“How drastically?”

“Imagine the sort of teasing involved with ‘gender switching’.”

“Yes.” He could well imagine. Poor Ani! To be cruelly teased for a natural occurrence among her people.

“Ani made a decision for his future. That decision involved the lovely Padmé.”

Gorash glanced at her. She was pretty he supposed, but nowhere near as beautiful as his Ani had been. Not to mention her assets weren’t nearly as bountiful. Disappointment lay heavily on him. “Tell me straight, please. What happened to Ani?”

“Ani decided to remain as Anakin. There was a simple procedure to stop the switching process —”

“I see.” He did, too. True love had bitten Ani. As Anakin, he’d fallen for Padmé Amidala and made a decision that changed his entire life. Gorash and Ani the warrior princess were not meant to be. Had Anakin told Padmé of his heritage? By his quick denial of ever having



been there, Gorash doubted it. Would it have put her off or were there familial considerations in that particular decision? Had Anakin's family disowned him for choosing to remain one gender? Ahh, well, he sighed to himself. He would remember Ani in his thoughts. "Then I shall recall my memories as blissful moments of a lovely woman who is no more."

"You do that." Ben nodded and rejoined the two, leaving him alone. Gorash watched them for awhile, then went off to find his date for the evening. He'd been agonizing over whether or not to marry Lyria for months now, holding on to the hope that someday he'd see his Ani once more. Now to put that dream away. He'd often thought that he could grow to love Lyria. Well, now he'd make his commitment in full.

Gorash lavished extra attention on his date and finally let go of all thoughts of Ani from Floxycintilaria, that elusive planet he'd never been able to find.

---

How in the blazes did Gorash even remember that whopper, Obi-Wan wondered, then shook his head and told himself he shouldn't have compounded the lie they'd told that night with more lies. I shouldn't have done that, he thought, strolling back to Anakin and Padmé and ignoring Anakin's puzzled glance.

By the time Dormé was ready to leave, Obi-Wan's boredom factor had grown to such an extent that he'd actually contemplated sneaking out. He was more than ready to go home and snuggle with his wife.

---

It was time to kiss her. Any longer and Anakin suspected they'd explode on contact. Stepping closer, he saw Padmé's eyes widen, anticipation in those depths. She tilted her head a fraction as an invitation.

He managed to resist the urge to crush her to him, instead forcing himself to kiss her the way he knew she liked. First were barely there touches to her lips until she leaned closer. Next, were longer brushes, teasing and coaxing, although no real coaxing was needed. Finally, he deepened the kiss, drawing her flush against him, hands moving to cradle her face.

She came to him willingly, eagerly. Memories trickled through his mind. One kiss became two, then multiplied, but when Padmé yanked his shirt free of his belt, with the obvious intent of sliding her hands beneath it, he pulled away.

Padmé looked as dazed as he felt. Taking one of her hands, he kissed it's back and beat a fast retreat to his door.

"Good night."

Her mouth opened and closed several times, the hand he'd kissed remaining stretched out to him. "Ani..."

Anakin knew his smile was more than a little wicked. "Sleep well, my love."

After a second, she raised a brow. Her voice was breathless and soft. "Oh I will, Anakin. You sleep well too."

There were no more words between them before they went into their separate apartments.

---

“He choked you,” Sonas said quietly, watching Padmé’s reaction to the statement.

“It wasn’t Anakin,” she replied. ‘It was Vader.’ An infuriating smug expression was on her beautiful features. “Anakin loves me.”

Sonas resisted the urge to bang his head on the desk. Anakin’s wife was the most frustrating, infuriating individual he’d ever met. She was stubborn, more self-assured than any woman he knew, opinionated and completely set in her rationalizations. She’d grasped the diagnosis and used it to explain anything she didn’t want to face. Ergo, nothing was Anakin’s fault. Everything was Vader’s.

It was Vader who’d chopped off Mace Windu’s arm and allowed Palpatine to throw him out the window; who’d killed younglings and Jedi; who’d choked her and it was Vader, she maintained, who’d tried to kill Ben. Anakin did none of it.

Frustrating. Even Anakin didn’t try to ignore his part in those actions. He admitted he had been party to them.

“By extension, Padmé, Vader loved you as well,” he pointed out, though he knew Vader had not felt emotion like most people. It was Anakin who had the full range of emotion, not Vader. Vader had shades of gray, degrees of lust and ire. Vader, Anakin had confirmed, had not felt the gentle sort of love for Padmé, but rather a lust to keep what was already in his possession. If Vader had won on Mustafar, he would have taken Padmé home, charmed and wooed her while pretending to be Anakin, and shown her off as his — a pure possession, not a wife.

A frown tilted her brow, the smugness disappearing. “You and I both know that isn’t true. Vader would never have loved me as a person like Anakin does. To Vader, I was simply a thing he owned. It’s there in what I remember, Doctor. The way he touched my face before leaving to go to Mustafar. I knew Anakin was different then, but I couldn’t accept what I knew as truth. I wonder now if Vader had at that moment noticed my...worth... as a possession.” She swallowed hard enough he could hear it. ‘You think I don’t see it, but I do.’ She sighed, shoulders slumping a little. “You think I’m rationalizing, unwilling to face matters. I’m not. I *know* Anakin was ambitious, angry and jealous. How could I not? I *know* he held Vader’s traits inside him long before they fully separated into two. I fully realize it was Anakin who made a choice that allowed the fracturing to occur to begin with.”

She did understand. It was there in her eyes, on her face and in her voice. Padmé knew very well where they all stood.

“I love my husband, Sonas. He’s not perfect, but he’s mine. I have to believe he let Vader cope with the pain of killing children, friends, and colleagues on Palpatine’s order because it hurt him too much. I have to believe that Anakin let Vader choke me until I passed out simply to get me out of the way of the inevitable duel between him and Ben because he knew I’d be in the middle of them trying to stop them. I have to believe that Anakin, beneath the emerging Vader, was motivated by his love and got carried away.” She shook her head. A veil of

sadness covered her over. “I lost him once to Vader and the dark side. I don’t intend to let it happen again.”

Sonos sat back in his chair, and took a deep breath. Though they had a mutual opinion of each other that rested firmly in loathing, he thought that now he had an inkling as to the woman Padmé Skywalker really was. She was emotionally strong and loyal, willing to stand by her husband despite the very real risks of doing so.

She really does love him, he decided.

“Then tell me what you want to happen. What are your personal hopes and goals, Padmé? Your children are alive. Do you intend to have them meet their father? Do you intend to eventually have more children?”

After a long measuring look, she outlined the hopes she’d been carrying with her.

“Well, then. Let’s begin working towards them.”

The first goal: meeting the children without anxiety to Anakin. It was agreed that Padmé could tell him a little about one of the children, but nothing specific. Then, to set up a meeting.

## Chapter 20: Children

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter Twenty: Children

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

Notes: Thank you for the reviews!

---

The silence was broken by Anakin's waking scream. He hated his nightmares, horrible dreams of Vader's deeds played out in full color. Lately, he'd dreamed of the children, of the trusting faces and terrified screams when they realized he meant to hurt them. If he thought hard enough, he could remember their names. Anakin half suspected Vader of deliberately sending memories his way in an attempt to make him give up control. He sat up, carefully keeping his gaze on the bed and not looking around it.

Several times over the past weeks he'd woken, looked up and seen Qui-Gon watching him, which was absurd since Qui-Gon was very dead. It wasn't the man himself that frightened him, but rather the idea that he was seeing things that couldn't possibly be there. That scared him.

He began to dread another glimpse, greatly fearing such an occurrence, for seeing things intimated a definite reality that he was well and truly cracking up. Vader had only been the first part of the process of fully losing his mind. His worries at that fed his fears. He knew he should talk to Sonas about it, but didn't want to. He'd rather talk to Obi-Wan.

Ben, he reminded himself, then took tiny glances left and right. There were no faces that shouldn't be there and he sighed with relief. In the morning, during their allotted hour to meet, he'd ask Ben if he thought that seeing Qui-Gon meant he needed to schedule more time in therapy.

The thought that Ben would have an answer comforted him and Anakin lay back down, returning to sleep.

---

Anakin's fear announced his presence long before he physically came through the door. The emotion was strong, as Qui-Gon had said, yet Obi-Wan felt a subtle difference to it. This was not the sort of fear Anakin had held before.

"I'm not being mindful of my thoughts," Anakin announced directly, dropping into a chair and stretching his legs out. He looked very tired. "I'm too worried to make the effort."

This was a new approach. Well, we'll just go with it, Obi-Wan decided, sitting across from him. "Go on."

Anakin fidgeted like he had as a child before beginning. "I'm having nightmares, but they're not what's really bothering me. They're only memories of Vader's actions. What's bothering me is what I see on waking." An explosive sigh left his lips. "I'm losing my mind, Obi-Wan. Seriously. I keep seeing Qui-Gon, of all people. I know, strange. I wake up and he's there, frowning, watching me. It's innerving, mainly because I know he can't really be there."

Oh dear. He'd been afraid of something like this. Obi-Wan leaned forward, forearms resting on his knees. "Well, if you're going round the bend, then Yoda and I are waiting for you there."

He looked up. "What?"

Obi-Wan inclined his head in a nod. "Qui-Gon's essence remained intact, Anakin. We speak from time to time. He's worried about you, but was reluctant to announce his presence."

"He remained intact." Anakin's brows lowered as he thought about that.

"Yes."

Slowly, the agonized expression was replaced by joy. "He cheated death."

For a moment, Obi-Wan considered that, then nodded again. "In a way. His body is gone, but his essence remains fully conscious, a spirit form."

Anakin laughed. "You know, Palpatine claimed such knowledge, yet didn't really possess it. How fitting that it's known by the Jedi his apprentice Maul killed." He relaxed in the chair. "You can't know how relieved this makes me."

"Oh, I think I can guess. Shall we spar a bit today, or talk?"

Anakin watched him a few seconds. "Let's talk. Tell me more about Qui-Gon."

Their chats now were deeper than they had ever been, the very sort they should have had over the years. Obi-Wan tried not to hold himself back and though he wasn't entirely successful — a distrust of Anakin would remain for a long while — he had a good start on that path.

---

Tonight was the night. Padmé was determined to get past Anakin's reluctance to remove any clothing. She'd dressed in her most provocative outfit — a lavender colored corset that barely contained her curves and a skirt with slits so high up the legs she flashed leg with the slightest movement —, had his favorite brand of wine chilling and turned the lights down low. She was supposed to be making him dinner, but take-out was infinitely better than her own cooking. The evening progressed nicely and right along the schedule she had planned in her mind.

They ate, danced a little to soft music, watched the sunset on the veranda and returned inside for a few drinks. He didn't seem to mind her amorous mood, gathering her to him on the plush couch.

Padmé slipped her hand under the edge of his tunic, rubbed teasingly at his chest, then stilled. What the —? Drawing back, she frowned. Grasping the edges of his tunic, she jerked it open before he could stop her. Her eyes widened. “Since *when* do you have chest hair?”

Was that a blush? Was he blushing? Her gaze lowered once more to the spot. There, amid the scarring, were patches of chest hair.

Anakin shifted position a fraction. “Since I quit shaving my chest.”

Padmé leveled herself off of him, returning to her previous position beside him and adjusting her top. “You what?”

“I thought you *liked* my chest smooth.”

But hadn't it been smooth all along? She never recalled any hair on his chest at any time. Padmé recalled all the times she'd run her hands over his chest. Nope. No hair. Had he shaved his chest like he'd shaved his face and throat? A giggle from the mental picture that presented left her before she could stop it. “Oh Ani. Is that what always took you so long those times you claimed you needed to freshen up from traveling before we—”

He scowled, but the frown smoothed out quickly. He nodded, a somewhat sheepish grin turning his lips. “Silly, huh?”

“Silly?” Padmé smiled. “I think it's sweet.”

“Sweet? Six years of shaving my chest was sweet?”

It was her turn to frown. “Six years? I only recall three. Did I lose three years between us or did you really start shaving your chest at...” she made mental calculations, “...seventeen?”

The mood was broken. Anakin drew his tunic back in place and reached for his wine. “There's a story behind it, honest. We were on an assignment and chest hair was... detrimental.”

“Detrimental? Oh, I can't wait for this story.”

“Some things just should not be put to voice. That story is one of them.”

“Please,” she said, hand touching his. “I'm intrigued. Was it detrimental to you both? I can't for the life of me imagine under what circumstances chest hair would be detrimental for a man.”

He laughed, sipped his drink and raised a brow. “Well... you might be surprised.” Casting a glance askance, he obviously reconsidered. “Then again, maybe not.”

He began the story, making her laugh so hard she cried. By the time he finished, she was gasping for breath.

“And you've shaved you chest ever since?” She wiped her eyes. Too, too funny, and to think that Baron Gorash was involved! Padmé could picture it all in her head. Teenaged

Anakin trying desperately to exasperate Obi-Wan and Obi-Wan trying desperately to ignore his antics.

Anakin nodded. “Ever since. Until Vader’s suit, that is. It took a long time for any hair to come back because of the scarring.”

Leaning forward, she parted his tunic. “I am *not* used to seeing hair on your chest.”

“There’s not much. I thought I’d never get any again.” He laughed once more. ‘I recall saying nearly those same words to Obi-Wan when he told me to shave.’ Draining his glass, he set it aside. “If you don’t like it, I suppose I could have laser treatment to remove it permanently, though I must admit the thought of burning away anything, any way on my body gives me shivers. Shaving is out for obvious reason and I’m not waxing....” He trailed off and Padmé hurried to reassure him.

“No, no!” She ran her hands across his chest. “I like it.”

“Yeah?”

Padmé smiled and moved closer, determined to prove just how much she liked it. Their mouths met, kiss becoming heated.

She soon found Anakin’s protestations to removing clothing had altogether disappeared.

---

This naming thing was getting ridiculous, even if it was amusing everyone around them to no end. Padmé was especially amused, remarking that they could call him ‘noname’ like it was one word. ‘No-*nah*-may’ was just one of the pronunciations she’d come up with. Anakin suggested ‘Qui-Gon’, but Qui-Gon threatened to never visit again if they named the boy after him.

Dormé, meanwhile, was scouring name lists for suitable names and was growing more frustrated by the day when none seemed right. By twelve weeks, a child *should* be named.

“I did it!” Dormé came through the door, arms laden with purchases. Her excitement fairly colored the air about her. “I found the perfect name! You’re going to love it! I heard it and it was perfect.” She grinned.

Cradling the boy in one arm, Obi-Wan nodded encouragingly. “What is it?”

Her mouth opened. Gradually, her smile faded and her lower lip began to quiver. Distress twisted her features. “I can’t remember,” she wailed, loud enough to wake their baby. ‘I was so excited about finding it....’ With a dejected air, she set the packages down and sat beside him. “It’s gone. Poof!”

She looked so sad. “It’ll come to you, my love. Don’t worry about it.” He rocked the baby.

“But it was just right. I even stopped the man to make sure I had the correct spelling.”

She was on the verge of a crying jag, he saw it coming and hurried to distract her. “You’ll think of it. So, what did you buy today?” Obi-Wan forced cheer into his voice. He’d had to reign her in several times already in her shopping.

Dormé glanced at him, a look indicating she knew what he was trying to do. “Don’t worry, Ben, no velvet today.” She paused. “They only had twelve yards and I need more than that. I want to have thirty or forty yards in order to have enough after smocking. Smocking, as you know, really eats up fabric. Twenty yards can easily end up as only around five after smocking.”

He didn’t know that, but he’d learned to simply nod and agree. Besides, the crafts she ended up working on did interest him in a ‘how can she stand to sit and do that for hours’ way.

“I picked up my clothing order and the pendant I bought for Padmé for her birthday. No new purchases. I resisted buying you a colored shirt you wouldn’t wear anyway even though it was pretty. The color would have matched your eyes.”

Obi-Wan resisted both her and Anakin’s efforts to get him into something besides white, beige and brown. Why did they think he needed to wear colors? He happened to like beige, white and brown. Besides, Anakin wore enough color for about six people these days. “Nothing at all new?” He pretended to be shocked. “Are you feeling okay?”

Slipping off her coat and shoes, she curled against him, her head on his shoulder and one finger stroking their son’s cheeks. “I’m a bit tired is all.”

Within minutes, she’d drifted off.

I’m a pillow and a bed, Obi-Wan thought, but he was content with his son and wife both against him, so he didn’t move, even when his shoulder went to sleep. Dormé slept an hour, then woke and took their son, disappearing into their bedroom to put her clothes away.

Obi-Wan took the moment to contact Anakin. He was curious how that plan to court Padmé was going. Anakin had been fairly close mouthed about the process, just saying over and over that he was taking his time. There was going to be no rushing.

After an unusual amount of time, Anakin answered. Obi-Wan took one look at the goofy expression and knew that Padmé’s not so subtle attempts at seduction had succeeded. “What happened to taking your time? To wooing her?”

“Are you kidding,” Anakin replied. “We *took* our time. Twelve weeks is an eternity.”

Especially since Obi-Wan now knew the initial courting years earlier had only been a few days. “Be careful, Anakin.”

“I *am* being careful. Multiple methods of careful — which, by the way, she had planned already.”

“I didn’t need to know that. Besides, that’s not what I meant.” Sometimes, Obi-Wan could still see a bit of teenager in Anakin, like right now. He blinked. Was that a smirk?

Anakin laughed. “I know what you meant. I’m teasing, Obi-Wan. Relax. Have you named the baby yet?”

Obi-Wan scowled and ended the transmission, knowing Anakin wouldn’t take offense at the abrupt end. Asking about the baby’s name had become Anakin’s way of stopping a conversation he didn’t wish to continue. He checked on Dormé, found her taking a bath and



singing a somewhat off-key lullaby to their son, who kicked his feet and blew spit bubbles in his carrier. He changed into sleep pants and returned to his place on the couch to read a bit.

He knew the exact moment when their son was asleep, for Dormé came from the nursery chanting, ‘stay asleep, stay asleep, stay asleep’ over and over in a whisper. It was doubtful that would do any good, but he understood the need to try. Their son refused to sleep through the night. He seemed to think that everyone only needed three hours of sleep at a time. One of them would go in there and he’d start cooing up a storm, kicking his feet and drooling.

Dormé disappeared back into the refresher and was in there long enough that he *knew* what was on her mind. He closed his eyes, smiling a little in anticipation. Gradually, the scent of her perfume drifted to him and he reached back for her as she leaned down to him.

Several hours later, they lay face to face, exchanging kisses and gentle caresses. He stroked his fingers across her cheek. “I love you more than I ever thought possible. The very fact that we found each other amazes me.”

Dormé pressed a kiss to his lips, then gasped and sat up. “Don-Al!”

“What?” Obi-Wan sat as well, frowning, waiting for an explanation.

She laughed, a warm sound. “Don-Al. *That’s* the name I’ve been trying to remember.”

“Don-Al,” he repeated, then did so again with ‘Kenobi’. He nodded. It had a certain ring to it. “I like it.”

And so it was agreed. Their first born had finally been named.

Don-Al.

---

Anakin didn’t think a thing of walking right in to Padmé’s apartment. After all, she’d told him to for weeks. It wasn’t until he noticed the scene in the living area that he paused his strides.

Padmé was on the floor playing with two children. On the couches were Bail and Brea Organa and Owen and Beru Lars. They all seemed nervous upon noticing him. He attributed it quickly to a worry over how he would behave and adjusted his robe with the sort of apprehension he hadn’t felt in years. Suddenly he was sweating. Profusely.

“You’ve visitors,” he said, then winced. Way to point out the obvious, Anakin.

She looked up with a radiant smile. “We have visitors, Anakin.” Padmé corrected him and moved up onto her knees, holding out a hand to him. “Come and meet Luke and Leia. They’re delightful.”

What did the children’s parents think of that? “With permission of their parents.” He watched the two couples exchange glances.

Owen crossed his arms and gave a stiff nod, while Beru slid so close to the couch edge that Anakin thought she was going to fall off. Maternal anxiety? Was Beru one of those worrying mothers?

“We give permission,” Breha began, “but I assure you, Leia makes up her own mind who she cares to be acquainted with.”

Who did she get that from, he wondered. Was it Bail or Breha? He’d met Leia before, but only as Vader, never as himself.

Leia rose, smoothed her dress and approached him. “I’m Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan.” Cool eyes assessed him and the small beauty inclined her head. “How do you do, Master Skywalker? It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

He couldn’t help the smile that curved his lips. He found himself responding in a way Vader never would have. What a cutie! She was trying so hard to be proper in her manner. “I’m pleased to meet you as well, Princess.” Anakin crouched down. “You can call me Anakin if you wish. I don’t like titles much these days.”

She looked at her parents and, presumably, they nodded, for Leia stretched out a hand, touching his a brief moment. “Thank you, Anakin, and you are welcome to use my name.” Glancing behind her at Luke, who was playing with a shuttle model and waiting to be formally introduced, she said, “May I ask a question?”

“Certainly.”

“Are you and Luke family?”

“Why?”

“Because his name is Skywalker too.”

There was a moment of tense silence and then Breha snapped her fingers.

“Leia Organa, watch your manners.” Her tone was stern.

“Yes mom, but —”

“Mind your mother,” Bail said softly and Leia nodded.

“It’s okay,” Anakin told them. “I don’t mind the question.” Poor kid, he thought, getting stuck with Skywalker as his middle name. Luke Skywalker Lars. Ugh. Couldn’t they have chosen something more conventional? After all, they chose Luke for his first name. That was nice and conventional.

He glanced at Owen and Beru. Both, he remembered, had been attached to his mother. Was using Skywalker an attempt to honor her memory? Too bad Luke hadn’t been a girl or they could have used Shmi. Less embarrassing for the poor kid. But, he supposed Skywalker had been some sort of compromise between them. He could see Beru wanting to use Shmi for a boy *or* girl. Luke Shmi Lars. No, that didn’t flow well, did it?

Padmé caught his hand, squeezed it. Anakin only had a few seconds to wonder why he wasn’t more distressed at thoughts of his mother before he was answering Leia’s question.

“I guess you could say we’re technically related. Owen is my... stepbrother.”

The tone of the moment changed, relaxed and Anakin settled on the floor to enjoy the visit.

Breha excused herself after an hour, claiming errands she had to run, but Padmé knew there were no errands. Breha needed to rest and regain her strength. Bail and Breha had been very frank with her as to their reasons for being on Coruscant most of the time recently. Breha was dying. She had a rare genetic illness that was slowly sapping her strength. She'd been sick for years, but undiagnosed until recently. Her illness was progressing faster now and soon, she'd be gone. A couple hours of activity exhausted her and most days she could not move from bed without someone helping her. Still, she never stopped trying. She was determined to be an example to Leia until the end.

Padmé respected that. She'd already made arrangements to keep Leia with her while Bail took Breha for treatment. At first, she'd hoped to have Leia back, but had quickly nixed the idea. Padmé was her birth mother and Anakin her father, true. However, Bail and Breha had raised her. They were her parents and while Padmé longed to have her children with her and Anakin, that could not happen.

She couldn't take Luke from Owen and Beru either, not when she knew that Beru couldn't have children and considered Luke her own. It had been Owen who'd insisted on an emotional distance, who told Luke that while his mother loved him, she was unable to care for him at present. It had been Owen who made sure Luke knew he had more than they somewhere in the galaxy and made him understand that sometimes, parents could not be with their children, so they gave them to those who would protect them and raise them well. Owen made sure Luke knew his heritage, at least on Padmé's side. She didn't know what he'd told Luke of Anakin.

Her plans changed. The children would remain where they were, but would receive visits regularly and grow knowing they were loved, that leaving them as babies had been a difficult, painful and wholly necessary decision at the time.

She left to make a tray of refreshments, Beru joining her. They worked in silence a long moment, placing glasses and a pitcher of juice on a tray, then arranging cookies and small cakes.

"I was scared to bring him, Padmé."

"I know." How could she have missed Beru's too pale face or the worried expression?

"So much could go wrong with this." Beru piled more cookies on the tray, then shrugged. "They're Luke's favorite. He'd eat a whole jar of them in one sitting if I let him. He doesn't get them often, though. Owen's not a cookie man. He prefers pies."

Padmé contemplated the cookies. While she didn't eat processed sweets often, preferring such sweets as fresh fruit, when she did indulge, she liked these cookies best. She too, could eat a jar of them. It was nice to know her son shared that preference, that they had something in common. "I'm not going to take him from you, Beru. I just want to know him and be a part of his life in some way. I know I can't raise him or Leia, it's too late for that. They're settled and it would be cruel to take them away."

The relief she saw on Beru's face reassured her that she was making the right decision. "Thank you." Beru blinked, tears rolling down her cheeks. "I thought you'd take him and we'd never see him again. Owen told me I was being silly, that you weren't the sort of woman to do that, but... I worry."

On impulse, Padmé hugged her. “As far as he’s concerned, you’re his mother by action, if not title.”

“I know.”

They talked a little longer and when they took the tray out, both were surprised to find only Owen waiting.

---

Leia’s mind worked in devious little circles. Anakin watched her. As soon as her mother was gone, after insisting Leia choose snacks wisely the rest of the day, Leia was trying to convince Bail they needed to go out for ice cream. Bail wavered a bit, obviously remembering his wife’s instructions, then agreed.

Leia smiled smugly, then glanced at Anakin. “Can *Anakin* come with us, Daddy? Please? I don’t want to go if Anakin can’t come.”

He waited for Bail’s refusal, but after a long look his direction, Bail nodded. The movement was stiff, as though he thought he should refuse. “If he’d like.”

Leia tilted her head, again glancing his way. This time, her eyes found Luke. “Can *Luke* come with us?”

“Are we turning this little outing into a party, Leia?”

“Please, Daddy? I don’t want to go if Luke can’t go.”

Anakin covered a smile with one hand and noticed Owen doing the same. Leia looked to have Bail wrapped firmly around her little finger. Although, now that he thought about it, many fathers were wrapped like that. Would *he* have been? Would he have caved in on anything if his daughter had smiled up at him and batted her little lashes the way Leia was doing?

Yes, he decided. In a second. For a moment, he let himself imagine such a moment. Somewhere in the galaxy, his and Padmé’s daughter was being raised by a loving couple that treasured her as their own. Padmé had assured him of that. He hoped someday to be able to meet her, without the worry of Vader.

Swallowing hard past the lump in his throat, he decided he’d like to go with them for ice cream, if only to give himself more pleasant images to imagine and long for, images to replace the nightmares.

Owen promised to tell the women where they went and Anakin followed Bail, Luke and Leia out to the elevator. It was a surprise and a delight when both children took his hands.

## Chapter 21: Instinct

---

Title: The Long Road Back  
Author: kasey8473  
Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.  
Chapter Twenty-one: Instinct  
Rating: M  
Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.  
Notes: Never fear — no triangles! — note explains itself upon chapter reading.

---

“Owen?” Padmé set the tray down. “Where is everyone?”

He looked up. “They went out for ice cream. I let Luke go with them.”

“Anakin too?”

His nod was slow. “Him too.”

Padmé sat down beside him. “Owen, I...” She shrugged, helpless to express her wonder in that. Owen sheltered Luke from much he’d deemed unsavory or wrong in the galaxy. For him to not only agree, but remain behind was an amazing feat of restraint on his part.

“You’re wondering why? Luke trusts him. He’s friendly with strangers, but won’t usually go right to them. When he does, it’s always turned out that we could trust that person with our lives, like he has this instinct that tells him who to trust, who is good...”

Beru knelt on the floor, her hands on his knees. After a moment, Owen covered her hands with his. “He trusts Anakin?”

Owen snorted. “Trusts? He took his hand and led him to the elevator. At last view, Leia was taking his hand as well.” He turned his head. “Padmé, you’re crying.”

She wiped at her tears. Their children trusted him! And after a single meeting! Her joy in that made her emotional. She hadn’t expected a connection so soon. She’d hoped, of course. “I know. It’s just.... Anakin didn’t want to know anything about them at first, but then he agreed to know a bit of one, not both, so I’ve been telling him about Leia. Should I have been telling him of Luke? Doesn’t every man want a son? Wouldn’t he have liked hearing of Luke?”

Beru shook her head. “He seems wistful when he looks at Leia. Besides, Leia, while young, is very aware there are matters she cannot discuss. Luke wears his heart on his sleeve. He doesn’t keep secrets. The only reason he’s not calling us Aunt and Uncle is because we’re making a game of it. If he can refrain, there’ll be a surprise at home.”

“Some surprise,” Owen said, shifting and removing his hands from Beru’s. “Obi-Wan wants to begin training him to Jedi ways, though how he’ll work that when he’s here on

Coruscant I don't know."

Padmé wondered herself, since Dormé had been talking of moving back to the cottage on Naboo. Of course, Naboo was closer to Tatooine than Coruscant was. Perhaps Ben meant to commute?

"Is that your wish, Padmé? Do you want Luke trained?" Owen's gaze held a bit of cynicism, as though he thought it only a matter of time before a little bit of training turned into a full-blown Jedi lifestyle and that same removing of a child from loving arms that had hurt Anakin emotionally.

She could only answer with honesty. "I don't know. Ben hasn't mentioned it to me." When he did, she'd make sure he knew that Luke was to remain where he was. No taking him away for extended lengths of time. Padmé was fairly certain Ben didn't intend such a thing, but it never hurt to have the rules hammered out prior to negotiations.

They snacked on the juice and cookies and waited for Bail, Anakin and the children to return.

---

"Do you like ships?"

Anakin swallowed the last of his ice cream and thought on how best to answer Luke's earnest question. The boy had brought his toy along, showing no hesitation about using his imagination to pretend that little model was in a battle. He made sound effects, swooped the model in arcs only a Jedi had reflexes to pull out of and was having such a good time by himself that Anakin wanted to join him. "Yes, I like ships. I've flown a few."

"I'm going to be a pilot someday." This was said matter-of-factly, as a foregone conclusion.

That statement was familiar. "Are you?"

"Farming is okay, but I want more."

A sharp sense of déjà -vu made Anakin dizzy. *I want more*. Those were dangerous words. He should know. How to answer *that*? "Well, it's okay to be ambitious, Luke, just know your limitations and motivations."

The boy looked at him, then rolled his eyes and shook his head with an endearing grin. "Grown-ups," he mumbled. "Farming is boring. It's the same thing all the time. I want to do more than that some day."

"I'm going to be a Senator," Leia said, leaning across the table to set the napkin holder, their silverware and the spice shakers in a line along the table, 'Or a queen, like my mom.' She frowned as she arranged the items, then added Luke's half-finished bowl of melting ice cream to it. "There. This is the swamp and this is an outpost and..." She gave Luke clear instructions on his 'mission'.

Anakin sat back, watching the two play. Leia already had a good grasp of military maneuvers. Somehow, he didn't doubt she'd be a senator or queen someday. He shared a smile with Bail Organa at how well the two played together. There was something about the

two that instantly endeared him, made him feel somewhat protective of them. A connection, not to mention the growing sense he had.... Anakin briefly entertained notions of them as his and Padmé's, but that was ridiculous. Everyone knew that Brea Organa had hidden her pregnancy rather than face public scrutiny in case she miscarried. She'd had so many problems over the years. When she'd appeared with the baby Leia in her arms, the truth had come out. Not that she and her husband had said as much....

And anyway, Luke had Beru's blond hair. He wondered if Luke looked like Beru had as a child because he certainly couldn't see any of Owen in him. Neither child was his and Padmé's. Wouldn't he know? Although, he'd never known his children save while they were in Padmé's belly and that hadn't been very long. Not a proper sort of knowing.

Still, it was nice to imagine. Wishful thinking. Had his and Padmé's children turned out as well as these two? He knew he had a daughter, but what of the other child? Was it son or daughter? Were both well behaved? Did they know anything of their birth parents?

Later that night, when he and Padmé lay entwined on his bed — it was her sneaking over in the middle of the night this time, even though sneaking wasn't necessary — she asked him, "Did you like them, Ani?"

"Very much." He ran a hand through her long hair, let his fingers snag in the curls. 'I met Leia before, when Vader was ascendant. She's a cutie.' He sensed Padmé's pleasure in that statement. She seemed to have taken to the two quickly and they to her. Maybe someday, he thought, we can have more children, and this time we'd keep them with us. I wouldn't look at other people's children and long for my own. I wouldn't imagine a connection that isn't there, *couldn't* be there. "I liked Luke too."

Padmé made a noise of pleasure and snuggled closer.

He debated whether or not to mention the next matter, but then what would it matter if he did? It wasn't as though *he* would follow through on it. "Padmé... Do you know if there were any Jedi in the Organa families? And the Lars? I know you've talked with them all —"

She went very still, her hand curling on his chest. "Why?"

"Oh, just that the children.... I sensed...." He sighed. "Never mind. I'm probably imagining it."

"No, Ani, tell me."

"They have potential, *Force* potential. Both Luke and Leia. I thought I sensed it and there was a connection between us. I don't know, maybe I'm just imagining it. Is it possible?"

Padmé raised up and placed a kiss on his lips. "I'd say anything is possible."

She soon fell asleep, curled against him, yet Anakin remained awake, replaying the day in his mind. He wondered how many Force potential children were out there and thought on what ways a resurrected Jedi Order would have to differ from the old Order. In gradual degrees, he fell into sleep. His dreams were not pleasant.

— *Children screaming, tears wetting their faces and betrayal in their eyes. He had to do this. He'd been commanded, but was it right? They were only babies still. He had been that young once and as trusting. A smooth voice replying that not only was it right, it was just. Kill*

*the children before they are fully trained to kill you. Strike them down, cripple the Jedi traitors. How do you win a war? You kill all the enemy. Do it.*

*He couldn't do it; couldn't slash.... They were only babies.*

*His arm raising, legs moving forward. Relax, the voice came again. Let me take care of this, Anakin. Let me help you with this burden.*

*Anakin relaxing, grateful for the lessening of those troublesome emotions, letting himself slide backwards. Numbness was best. He could do his commanded job with blessed numbness encasing him. However, his movements do not feel quite his own. He's detached from what is happening.*

*Then the rooms on Mustafar. Him doing what he thinks is right and is ultimately wrong. The tears that come when he realizes **he** is not the one moving his limbs....*

*Not the one in control....*

*Not...*

*Let me bear your burden, Anakin. You know I can take it. —*

Anakin woke screaming, thrashing about. It took long moments for the terror to pass and only then did he see his wife crouched on the floor beside the bed, her eyes wide and fear on her face. The fear echoed his dream and Anakin wept, gathering the sheets to him. He was cold, shaking and sweating. A sick sensation settled in his belly.

"Anakin?" With the sort of caution she would display in front of a large predator, Padmé climbed back onto the bed and to him. Her hands were gentle, drawing him to her and holding him close. "Ani, what's wrong?"

He grabbed at her, enfolded her in his arms and pressed his face against her neck. "I let him, Padmé. I let him kill the children. I sat there and watched him like I was watching a holovid! I sat inside my head and let him do it because I thought the end result would be one thing. I..." He squeezed his eyes shut. "I didn't want to see their faces, to know I was really doing what Palpatine ordered. I killed them. You win a war by killing the enemy and that's what I thought I was doing."

She rocked him, made soothing noises. Anakin inhaled the scent of her perfume, his tears wetting her skin.

"I let it happen. I could have stopped it, but I didn't. I... I *retreated*, handed over my body to his control. It wasn't full at first, you understand. He only had partial control, but then it only got worse and I couldn't... deal... with the pain. All of those terrified children. Innocent faces, eyes pleading for mercy." Opening his eyes, he looked at her. "I thought Vader was back just now. I was afraid I'd wake and he'd be taunting me, hurting you —"

Her fingertips fluttered at his lips. "Hush. Hush. Where's your medication?"

With a shaking voice, he told her, then closed his eyes and waited. He heard the rustle of cloth, then her moving and her voice, talking to Sonas, and finally felt her hand on his shoulder.

"Come on," she said, giving him a pill to swallow. "He'll see you immediately."



Shaken, Anakin dressed and let Padmé take him to Sonas' office.

---

They made a breakthrough, the first full step towards reconnection of Anakin and Vader into one. It was the memory of the children that bothered him and the meeting of Luke and Leia that focused his will. Anakin was determined to deal with the memory in order to be around the children. He told Sonas that the two were children of Padmé's friends and that he didn't want to have to worry about more nightmares, or worry that Vader would hurt the children in some way.

Sonas knew who they really were. He didn't completely approve of Padmé arranging to have both children there at the same time. He'd thought first one and then the other later, but she'd gambled that Anakin could handle the meeting of both at once, even if he hadn't known their real identities. She'd been right. He had handled it and his mind had used the meeting to force him to begin facing those memories.

He progressed well in it, coming to grips with the actions taken and the deaths he'd caused. He was progressing well in most areas save that of his mother. There was still resistance in facing her death and his self-imposed promises to her as a child. Sonas was pleased. This process was moving right along and if Anakin didn't push himself too hard....

Sonas reviewed his session notes. That was a real danger. Each breakthrough gave him confidence and Obi-Wan had been given to wondering in private sessions if Anakin would reemerge from the process a teenager, ready to pick up his life right where he'd really begun splintering into two. The reason? Obi-Wan insisted that Anakin's maturity level had decreased.

It hadn't in reality. It was only relief at good progress that made Anakin giddy, willing to relax. Sonas told him he could meet with Padmé's family if he felt up to it.

Bending his head, he finished his outline of the next steps in treatment.

---

Obi-Wan liked these outings he, Dormé and Don-Al took about Coruscant. Anything to avoid having to fly anywhere. He'd gladly acquiesced to staying on Coruscant awhile longer. Anakin teased him about his reluctance to fly, but hadn't he earned a reprieve?

He lifted Don-Al from his carrier and cradled him. At nearly five months, the boy was remarkable in every way. Or so was the opinion of his naturally biased parents. Obi-Wan smiled. Every parent felt the same about their child and he recognized the feeling as the same one a Master had for his Padawan.

"If it isn't Obi-Wan Kenobi. Well, hello there."

The voice sent him into the past, bringing forth memories of the stolen moments they'd shared whenever their duties had allowed. He sat up straighter. She was amused, which he hoped was a good sign given their history, but for the life of him he couldn't remember anything of her mannerisms. Did the slightly raised brow indicate true amusement or was sarcasm or disdain about to appear? He knew with Dormé....

“Hello Sabé . How have you been?”

Her gaze fell to Don-Al, her polite smile lingering. “As well as can be expected, I suppose.”

Which was about as non an answer as she could have given. Obi-Wan turned his son so that she could see him better. “This is my son, Don-Al. He’ll be five months in a week.”

Sabé slid into the seat Dormé had left, her eyes narrowing a little. “Yes. He’s a beautiful boy. So tell me,” her smile widened, “how is your... *wife*?”

Oh yes.... The brow meant disdain, sarcasm, and all sorts of ill-humor moods. He struggled to maintain a mild expression. “Dormé is well.”

She nodded, turning the conversation to various news subjects, including the Senate dealings and the inane controversies currently in the public eye. Her manner was stilted and chilly. He’d hurt her more long ago than he’d thought. Obi-Wan glanced about the café , hoping to see his wife on her way back. As always in awkward encounters however, she was nowhere in sight. He had to press on in the conversation.

Abruptly, Sabé stopped talking. She bit her lip, as though trying to come to a decision in her mind over some matter. Her mouth opened twice before she sighed. He sensed great indecision in her. “Is.... Will you be... *both* of you, that is... at the parade on Naboo?”

“Possibly. We’re attending the gala on Alderaan. The princess has invited us herself and Senator Organa mentioned that Leia is hoping we’ll stay a few days. I don’t think the draw is myself or Dormé though. She likes to hold Don-Al.”

“I’ve never had the pleasure of meeting Leia. She seems a charming girl from pictures.”

“She is. She visits Padmé frequently.”

“Yes.” Sabé bit her lip again, her glance moving restlessly about them. “Is Padmé giving lessons in the art of being a young queen? The Princess would be wise to listen if that’s the case. Naboo still misses Padmé ’s leadership. Some were rather put out that she refused a position after the fall of the Empire.”

He hadn’t been aware of that. Politics had been Padmé ’s life once upon a time. Had her priorities changed? He rocked Don-Al a little. Priorities do over time, he thought. Look at him. “I believe they’ve simply struck up a friendship.”

There was a tiny frown between her eyes, tugging her brow downward. “I see.” Once more she glanced about them. ‘Is Padmé....’ Another sigh. She swallowed hard, lifted her chin a fraction and spoke softly. “I hadn’t meant to stop, you know. But I had to. You know about Padmé and her child.”

He leaned a bit closer. “Yes?”

“I don’t know what happened when she went into hiding, but I do know that Princess Leia is very close to the age Padmé ’s child would have been.” She flushed, yet pressed on. “I’m worried she might try and use the girl as a daughter substitute.”

Stretching out a hand, he took one of her hands. “The situation is under control.” Let her take that as she wished.

Sabé gripped his hand back and smiled, this time a genuine stretching of her lips. “Good! I heard of their meetings through my friends at the Alderaan branch of the Handmaiden Guild. Handmaidens know everything you know, and I started to worry. A handmaiden never really retires, but I suppose you already know that? Will you tell Padmé....” She released his hand and stood, leaving her request unspoken.

“She will be pleased you thought of her.”

“Thank you.” Tilting her head, she regarded him sadly. “Your wife is a lucky woman.” With that, she hurried away.

Obi-Wan was left feeling a bit better about their past. A few moments after Sabé had left, Dormé returned to the table. She sat in the chair, cloak held primly about her. Uh-oh. Something was wrong. Normally, she was all warmth and now she was as chilly as he’d perceived Sabé to be. “Dormé? What’s wrong?”

She rearranged the utensils, then folded her napkin three different ways. “Nothing.” Her voice was clipped, with the quivering of emotion about the edges.

“All right. Well, you just missed a former colleague —”

“I saw.” Again the controlled voice. This time, she compressed her lips so tightly that they were little more than a thin line.

“Oh.” It took seconds to grasp what she was thinking. “Dormé, you can’t think that —”

“Don’t tell me what I can think!” Sniffing, she reached for Don-Al and began the long process of strapping him in to his carrier. He seemed to pick up on her mood, his cries bringing glares from patrons at surrounding tables.

“My love—”

“Hah,” she scoffed.

And they were off, heading down the path of irrational argument all the way from the establishment, into the street and up in to Padmé’s apartment.

---

The wait for the refresher was interminable. Dormé emerged from the room and began to weave her way back through the tables. Looking up, she paused. Someone was at the table with Ben. Was it...? She frowned. Blast it! Her husband was talking to Sabé. Of all the times for a former girlfriend to show up! A twinge of uncertainty echoed up and down her body. Slim Sabé who looked cool and elegant in a green dress that showed off her slender figure.

I was that slim once, she thought, glancing down at herself. Hardly slim and elegant now, wearing a rumpled, figure-hiding dress that had spit-up on one shoulder and a cloak that was equally as concealing. She’d twisted her hair up, but as a mark to her hasty ablutions as Don-Al had cried non-stop, tendrils had escaped and more was hanging down her back and shoulders than was actually up.

Self-consciously, she sucked in her stomach tighter and dragged her cloak tighter about her. She watched Ben take Sabé’s hand and lean closer. Jealousy and dismay warred in her

head. Sabé smiled and stood, then hurried away. Why hurry, she wondered? Was she afraid of being seen? A million thoughts ran through her mind, the rational part of her mind telling her that she was blowing things all out of proportion. However, emotions welled up and she couldn't stop them.

Dormé wasn't sure why she couldn't just ask him about it. She felt hurt and betrayed and sad and....not herself. All through their arguing, she knew she should listen to him. Did she? No. All she really wanted to do was cry.

So she did, until he left the apartment, claiming he was going to take a walk to calm down. She cried some more and Padmé, who'd made herself scarce during the heated exchange, ventured out as a shoulder to cry on.

Padmé let her cry and talk and finally, when her tears dried up, had a bit of advice.

---

Carefully, Padmé sat beside her friend. Dormé had been crying a lot lately, but how to get to the subject? "Have you considered that he could be right about you overreacting?"

"No," was her stubborn reply. "You didn't see them, Padmé. She's so tiny and I'm so —"

"Stop right there. You just had a *baby*. Give yourself a chance to recover before claiming you're fat. It took months for your body to get where it's at and it'll take months to reclaim your old shape."

Not to mention that Dormé had been thoroughly enjoying being a beloved wife and mother, throwing strict diet and anything but genteel exercise to the wind. She had yet to seriously set herself to getting back into shape.

"*You* didn't," she pointed out, wiping her eyes.

"I was also mourning. If you'll remember, you threatened to hold me down and force-feed me on more than one occasion because I wasn't eating at all." That was an uncomfortable memory too. Padmé remembered Dormé standing over her with a plate of food and a determined expression. That particular battle of wills had always ended in Dormé's favor.

Dormé was silent a moment. "He romanced her years ago."

He'd been quite the charmer, too, from what she'd heard. Of course, at the time, she'd dismissed the stories as simple rumors. A proper Jedi behaving in such a manner? Never! How naïve she'd been in those thoughts, as she'd later found out! Sometimes she wondered why Sabé had kept him such a close secret, never acknowledging the rumors as true or false. She'd merely smiled and shaken her head as though amused. Had she wanted something all her own, apart from Padmé and the other Handmaidens? Padmé had unknowingly followed her friend's footsteps, but where Sabé's had turned away, her own had continued onward. "And you're the one he married; the one he had a baby with. Consider that it was also for you that he went against the Jedi code."

"There were no more Jedi for it to matter."

Silly wonderings, Padmé decided. Besides, didn't I hear that she was getting married soon? Who was it told me that? Eirtaé maybe? "The code is still a part of him. It's still there

and unchanged from what it was. He broke that vow for you, no matter how you rationalize it. He didn't do it for her. Ben left her rather than choose, but for you, he chose. He made a decision and freely admits it, introducing you to everyone as his wife."

Padmé watched her soak all that in and waited. Slowly, she saw a faint smile appear.

"So, what you're saying is that it's stupid to be jealous of an old flame?"

"Yes. She's the past. You, my friend, are the present and future. Ben loves you deeply and it's something that can't be missed. Even the blind could see it. Why, I bet Sabé wonders what it is like to be you."

It was amusing that she was filling the role Dormé once had, that of confidante, of soother of troubled nerves.

"You have a point."

"Just one?"

Her tone elicited a soft giggle from Dormé . "Okay, several. So what do I do?"

Now to the meat of the matter. "First, you have your hormone levels checked. I've never seen you so quick to cry. Then, you start up with diet and exercise. Work on your hobbies. Ease back into being yourself again, not just wife and mother."

Soon, they had her next moves mapped out.

## Ch 22: A Little Booze Goes A Long Way

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter 22: A Little Booze Goes a Long Way

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

Notes: So sorry for the delay in posting! The past couple weeks have been hectic for various personal reasons at my house!

---

Try as he might, Anakin couldn't seem to remember to call Obi-Wan 'Ben'. To him, Obi-Wan was always Obi-Wan and would never be 'Ben'. Doc had a long explanation for that, but Anakin hadn't listened to it. As long as it was okay with Obi-Wan, he'd just call him that.

Speaking of Obi-Wan.... Where was he? He was supposed to be there at Padmé's and wasn't. Dormé and Don-Al were there. He hadn't been able to miss them, not with Dormé breastfeeding out in the open like that. Talk about uncomfortable. Padmé had behaved as though it was nothing and there Dormé had been, breast hanging out and baby suckling happily, his little feet kicking. It had thrown him more than a little to walk in to that scene. He'd known she was there, just not like *that*.

Of course, Dormé had drawn a light blanket over Don-Al and herself after a moment of surprise, but still.... She'd been hanging out, the curve of her breast.... Thinking back to when he'd first met her, he couldn't remember what her shape had been like. He'd known she was female and faintly resembled Padmé. Other than that, she was a blur. He'd been so set upon Padmé that he'd not really seen anyone else.

Anakin stared at the Coruscant skyline without seeing it. I should probably go back inside, he thought without moving. Then again, if Dormé was still feeding Don-Al.... Maybe he'd better stay there on the verandah. He didn't want Padmé to think he was ogling Dormé's bare breast, even though he had been.

He sensed her behind him, felt her hand on his shoulder and heard her amused voice say, "It's safe to come back in now."

"I was being courteous by leaving," he insisted.

Her breath was warm against his ear. "Liar. You were looking and you were embarrassed."

Turning his head, he pressed a kiss to her lips before she could move. "Maybe I was a little embarrassed. It's not every day I see a naked breast that doesn't belong to my wife while she's sitting right there."

Padmé sat beside him, taking one of his hands in hers. "The feeding really made you uncomfortable?"

He felt a hot flush warming his cheeks. "The fact that she was feeding him didn't bother me, Padmé, it was the entire naked breast bit that did it." He motioned towards the room with one hand. "Is she okay?"

"Your entrance startled her, but she'll live." Her shrug was unconcerned and Anakin realized he didn't know much about Dormé except that she'd been Padmé's handmaiden at one time and was now Obi-Wan's wife. "Actually, she wants to know if you'd go find Ben. He left to take a walk hours ago and hasn't come back yet. They had a fight and he left fairly upset."

Minutes later, he was on the street and trying to figure out.... Inspiration hit him and he headed for the nearest bar he could find that was a complete dive. Obi-Wan had always favored little places tucked in out of the way areas. He knew he was in the right place long before he actually got to the establishment. It was perfect according to Obi-Wan's standards. Bright, neon lights outside along with people who looked as though they'd just escaped from Imperial prisons. Which they might have, now that he thought about it. He'd heard there'd been an increasing number of such instances in recent weeks. He didn't stop to ask, however, going inside the establishment.

The inside was everything the outside promised: dark, dingy and smelling of the body odors of several different species and fried foods. In short, it must be Obi-Wan's favorite bar in the neighborhood.

He found Obi-Wan at the bar, drinking two-handed. When he saw Anakin, he set down his drinks, attempted to stand from the stool and stumbled heavily against him. Somehow, he managed to turn that into an exuberant hug. "Anakin! Come and have a drink!"

"I've been looking for you. Dormé's worried." He deposited his friend back on the barstool and took the one beside him, ordering a whiskey.

"She's always worried about one thing or other." Obi-Wan's words slurred together. "Like today."

"What happened?" He glanced at the bartender, laid credits on the counter. "Leave the bottle."

Obi-Wan finished his drinks, stared blankly at Anakin's bottle of whiskey, and began to talk. "She drove me nuts, you know? I was annoyed at her showing up with all that *stuff*. My house was small and there she was, prancing around....She kissed like a...." He waved a hand about in circles. "You know?"

"Yeah, I know." He thought he could get what Obi-Wan was trying to say.

"Hot and cold and sweating and shaking all at once. She did that. Me. Head over heels and *gone*. You remember those times I'd leave for a few hours while you were in classes?"

How could he forget them? He'd always wondered what Obi-Wan had been doing. "Sure."

"I was seeing Sabé. She was adult by then and we'd kept running into each other in various places. She wasn't always on Naboo. The Queen trusted her to perform off-world tasks and we began to meet. Drinks here, dinner there. I broke it off when things became too serious. I was a Jedi and Jedi don't marry."

There was a point to this history lesson and Anakin had an awful feeling where it was headed. He swallowed his disbelief that Obi-Wan had had a girlfriend back then and sipped his liquor. There was much to Obi-Wan that Anakin had never known and was only now beginning to know.

"We were out today and Dormé left a minute. Sabé came over to say hello. Dormé saw her and thought...." He took the whiskey bottle, poured out a shot and drank it. "My wife thinks that I think that she's fat because she saw Sabé at our table. It's absurd, Anakin. She was talking nonsense. Have you looked at my wife lately?" At that, he paused and gave Anakin a hard stare.

"Um...." He tried desperately to keep those images of her breast feeding from his mind. "Well...."

"She's beautiful!" Obi-Wan clinked their glasses together. 'Let's drink to my beautiful wife. My ravishing wife who puts all other women to shame.' He drank, then paused. "You're not drinking."

Anakin hurried to drink.

"I told her she was beautiful and she said I was lying. Why would I lie about that?"

"You wouldn't."

"Exactly. She's being *completely* unreasonable."

He resigned himself to a long evening, as Obi-Wan was apparently feeling loquacious. As soon as he could, he slipped away to let the women know where they were.

It was in fact very late when he half carried a mumbling and mostly incoherent Obi-Wan through Padmé's apartment to the guest suit. Dormé walked ahead of him, hurrying to turn down the bed.

"I haven't seen him this tanked in years," Anakin commented, using the Force to keep them walking a semi-straight line.

"I have," she replied, beginning to undress Obi-Wan the second he was on the bed.

Obi-Wan roused himself enough to grin goofily at her and mumble, "My beautiful bride," before finally fully passing out. The soft rumble of snores escaped his lips.

Dormé sat on the bedside, gathering her robe to her. She was covered neck to floor in a garment that looked as though it could fit five of her with room to spare. She left her task barely begun, watching Anakin remove Obi-Wan's boots. "Not long after we arrived on Tatooine, I woke up in the middle of the night. Ben was at the dining table, working his way through a bottle of whiskey and talking to himself. At least at the time I thought he was talking to himself. I think now that he was pouring out his thoughts to Qui-Gon."



He set the boots down. She knew about Qui-Gon?

"I remember some of the things he said. It's always the same things he says when he's drunk. He worried that he pushed you too hard, Anakin. He worried that taking you from your mother is what started you down the road to the dark side and he worried that he'd loved you too much. He should have seen, should have gotten you the help you needed." Her gaze was solemn and very tired. "He feels guilty and responsible for much that was not under his control."

"I know." Anakin nodded. "We're working through—"

"No, I don't think you do know." She sniffled and he noticed the sheen of tears in her eyes. "He blames himself for your turning. He agonizes and wonders if he'd done anything differently... would the outcome have changed?"

She thought he didn't know when he truly did. Obi-Wan was hurting emotionally just as much as Anakin was. "Believe me, Dormé, I have tried to assuage his guilt over matters to no avail. It will take time." He shrugged helplessly. What could he even say to her? "If it is any consolation, all he could talk about was you tonight and how your irrational accusations bewildered him. He loves you, Dormé and you would do well to realize how much. Do you have any real idea what marriage means to a Jedi? Do you know how much he must love you to go against that Code?"

Her manner softened. "I do. Padmé pointed that out earlier."

"You should be more secure in your marriage than most women, knowing what you do."

Slowly, she nodded. When she spoke, her voice was nearly a whisper. "Thank you for finding him tonight and bringing him back."

He inclined his head in a nod. "And about earlier.... I'm sorry. If I'd known, I wouldn't have —"

"No, it's okay. Don't worry about it. I should have known better."

She was uncomfortable, so Anakin let the matter drop. "Good night, Dormé."

He found Padmé on the verandah, the lights off as she waited. She came to him, slipped her arms around him, and they stood there for a long while in the dark.

---

Light surrounded him as a cocoon, blinding, intense. Something cold and hard was pressed to Obi-Wan's cheek. Shifting, he patted around him, searching for the blanket. He couldn't find it and frowned, keeping his eyes closed, forestalling opening them as long as possible. As he rose to consciousness in slow degrees, he became aware of little things: the cool, hard surface that extended beneath his body, the sound of voices.... Anakin?

Where am I?

He braved the brightness and opened his eyes. A bedroom came into view, tastefully decorated, yet skewered by the fact that he had apparently been sleeping on the floor. He winced. He hadn't even begun to move and already his head was pounding.

Who the blazes left the curtains open?

Things moved outside the window and after blinking a few times, Coruscant traffic lanes came into focus. Watching them made him dizzy.

A pair of feet came to him, attached to slim ankles of his wife. Her nightgown swirled about her ankles when she stopped and she knelt, one hand touching his cheek. "I brought you a hangover remedy, Ben."

"Must you shout," he managed to croak.

"I'm whispering."

"My head hurts." Not to mention his tongue and teeth all seemed to be wearing individual fuzzy outfits.

"I imagine it does after all Anakin told us you were drinking." She proffered the cup.

He grunted, pushing himself to a sitting position and taking the cup. "Thank you."

Leaning over, she pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Breakfast in an hour."

She was being optimistic wasn't she? He rather thought it'd take hours to feel semi-human enough to eat something.

Obi-Wan downed the liquid, swallowing hard when it tried to crawl back up his throat. Dormé had tried to make it taste good, but nothing could make this remedy palatable. He'd tried over the years with no success. It took nearly half an hour to drag himself off the floor and in to take a shower. When he emerged he felt human again and decided he might be able to stomach some food after all.

---

The table was beautifully set. Candles, flowers... the works. Padmé had learned a lot in that class in the art of table setting. How long until she lost interest in it though?

Anakin sat, crossing his arms. She couldn't seem to settle on anything to do with her time, flitting from one thing to the next, and when she wasn't doing that, she was putting all of her attention on him. It was too much at times, as though she was afraid he'd leave her if she didn't, that he'd disappear.

Maybe she really believed it. After all, before she'd had a career, put her energies into it and he *had* disappeared. He'd become Vader.

He wasn't sure how to talk to her about it.

Raising his gaze, he watched Obi-Wan stumble across the room to join him. "Morning."

"Was I drinking speeder fuel last night?"

"Possibly," Anakin replied with the same amount of cheer Obi-Wan had always used when *he* was hung-over. Payback, and all that. "I'm not sure what was in some of those concoctions."

"Are you hungry," Padmé called from the kitchen.

“Definitely,” Anakin answered. He was very hungry, stomach growling. He usually ate long before this hour.

Obi-Wan rested his chin in one hand. “How are her cooking lessons going, by the way?”

He snorted. “She’s had two private instructors quit and the third just never showed up again after the first lesson. Her sister offered to come and teach her, as did her mother, but she declined. Something about doing things her way.”

“Hasn’t she hired—” Obi-Wan broke off as Padmé came through the doorway with a tray and began setting plates down.

What the heck? Anakin stared down at the plates. Padmé gave him a big smile. He thought his breakfast was supposed to be an omelet with toast and sausage.

“I had a little trouble with it,” she said and hurried back into the kitchen.

Trouble?

Obi-Wan peered at the plates with an amused cast to his expression. His lips twitched. “Looks to me like she cremated it.”

Poking it with a fork, Anakin was mildly dismayed to see liquid ooze out. He wasn’t a big fan of raw food. “It can’t be any worse than Imperial cafeterias.” He put forth a valiant effort to be optimistic. Padmé *had* to be getting better at cooking. She was trying hard enough and trying was three-fourths of eventual success.

Or was the just something Master Yoda had said to make the slower learning kids feel better?

“Are you certain of that?” Obi-Wan quirked a brow.

Anakin forked a bite and held it up, then shoved it in his mouth before he could have second thoughts. He chewed, tasting ash and egg and something.... Yuck. He hadn’t known it was possible to completely burn the outside of an omelet and still have uncooked egg in the middle.

There was an increasingly amused glint in Obi-Wan’s eyes.

Forcing himself to swallow, Anakin smiled. “It’s good.”

“Uh-huh. Of course it is.”

Dormé emerged from the kitchen with a single bowl. Her glance paused on Anakin’s plate, lingering. She pursed her lips. “Do you have enough to eat, Anakin? I made extra if you’re still hungry.”

“I’m fine.” She left and he geared himself up to take another bite. It would be easier to eat Imperial food service meals, or that gruel the Temple cafeteria had served. Wait a minute. He stared at Obi-Wan’s breakfast. Wasn’t that exactly what Obi-Wan was eating? It looked like it, but smelled... *good*, redolent of sugar and fresh berries. Anakin’s mouth watered.

“My wife is an excellent cook. Are you sure you don’t want any?”

“She’s trying, Obi-Wan, okay? She’s trying.” Padmé tried very hard to cook for him. Her best meals were those she ordered in and tried to pass off as her own cooking.

Obi-Wan tasted his cereal, making pleased noises. “She knows what I like. Berries and nuts and spices. You know, Anakin, I’d never perfected that recipe the Temple cafeteria used, but she took and ran with it. You should try it.”

Anakin leaned over and whispered, “And how do you suggest I explain to my wife that I hate her cooking?”

For a moment, Obi-Wan looked like he was going to give him a smart-ass answer. Instead, he shrugged. “Tell her. I’m sure she’ll understand.”

“Tell her.”

“Yes, Anakin. Tell her. Break it to her gently.”

Shoving the food around his plate, Anakin thought about that. Tell her. That was a novel concept. Maybe he’d broach it in their couples session this afternoon. With a last longing stare at Obi-Wan’s bowl, he excused himself.

---

By morning’s light, and in the well-stocked kitchen, Padmé was awash in insecurities. She’d burned three omelets before making one somewhat edible and the rest of Anakin’s breakfast was just as much a mess as the omelet. She waited for him to ask for something different. Raising a hand, she chewed on one thumbnail and leaned against the counter.

“He hates it, Dormé, I know he does.”

Beside her, Dormé put her own breakfast on a tray, along with two steaming mugs. “Haven’t you hired a chef yet?”

“No. I had a difference of opinion with the last candidate. She thought my husband was up for grabs and I disagreed.” Reaching out, she took a handful of berries from the bowl on the counter and began to eat them. ‘You wouldn’t believe the nuts that keep applying. If it’s not me they’re interested in, it’s Anakin.’ She finished the berries and sighed. “I’m going to contact the service we used to use. They should still have me on file; they keep everything.”

“Why not let me take Anakin some cereal?”

She shook her head. “Why can’t I cook, Dormé? I used to do just fine when I had to, but —”

“When did you have to do anything but heat up your food before? First there were your mother and sister, then school meals and you never had a chance to devote time to learning how to cook. However....” Dormé grasped her arms, gave her a tiny shake. ‘You have no interest in cooking. It bores you and always has. Don’t try fooling yourself or Anakin. You need to work within what you’re interested in.’ Her grin was wry. “Besides, I hardly think Anakin expects you to cook for him. Did he ever before?”

“Well, no....”

“Exactly. Contact the service and quit worrying about feeding him.”

Good advice, Padmé decided. Still, maybe she'd better talk with Anakin about it before doing it. Maybe they could discuss it that afternoon in their counseling session.

## Ch 23: Leading and Following

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter 23: Leading and Following

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

Notes: For those curious, there are two more chapters after this one.

---

Anakin made himself stop fidgeting and began gathering his thoughts. He reminded himself that counseling was good for them. She wasn't going to be upset when he asked her to just hire a service for the cooking, nor would she get that hurt expression on her face when he told her to let him have time alone.

"Tell Padmé how you feel, Anakin," Sonas invited with his kind doctor smile. "Wait until he's finished before responding, Padmé."

Tell her how he felt. He clasped his hands together. His shirt was damp against the small of his back and he shifted. Padmé's anxiety was high, like she had something to tell him that she knew he wasn't going to like.

No, he told himself. Concentrate on you for now. Current issues only please.

"Okay. I feel like you're paying this lavish attention to me just to fill up the empty hours. Don't get me wrong, I do like the attention, just not every waking hour of every day. I feel like the only time I have to myself is when I'm with Obi-Wan or running errands. I need time alone and you're not giving me that. I want you to take some of those speaking engagements you're being offered. I want to see you happy and you're not happy, don't try and tell me you are. You need —"

"Anakin," Sonas interrupted with a slight frown. "Your *feelings*, not what you think she needs or should do."

He stared at him. Wasn't that what he was doing? "I *am* talking about my feelings. I feel she needs —"

"You're talking about action, not feelings. We don't need to fix it, not yet. We need to discuss your emotions, then discuss hers. Only then will we look towards fixing the matter."

"I don't understand."

Sonas leaned forward a little. "What emotion do you have when Padmé pays constant attention to you?"

He bit his lip, remembering the past few days. "Smothered? Like I can't breathe? Not that I can breathe well to begin with, but I..."

"Good. Very good."

That was what Doc wanted? Oh, easy! "I feel angry, Doc. I mean, she has this amazing talent for public speaking and leadership and she's refusing to use it. She's needed there, yet all she does is wait on me hand and foot. I'm angry that she won't consider helping in the rebuilding of democracy since she was a full supporter of it before. I also feel satisfied at the same time. Selfish. It pleases me that she's chosen me over politics, that she spends all her time trying to please me." He paused. "That's wrong, isn't it? I shouldn't feel that way."

Doc Sonas shook his head. "On the contrary, Anakin, it's perfectly normal to have such feelings. Considering your history together, I'd be surprised if it was otherwise."

"It's normal?" Really?

"Yes. Padmé, do you wish to respond to this?"

She slid forward in her chair. "First he wants me to have no job and now he wants me to get out more? He asks for one thing, then complains when he gets it? I couldn't be more confused. What does he..." She broke off, turning to face him. "Anakin, what do you expect of me? You say you love me and you're glad we're still together, but I don't know what you want from me as a wife. You have to tell me, because I can't read you anymore. I thought I could and I can't. Do you want me to do wifely things, like cook and do laundry, or do you want me to have a career?"

"Can't you do both," he replied. "Why can't you have the laundry and cooking arranged like before? Why not work part-time, with a set number of hours devoted to your work? We can figure it out right here, right now. So many hours and anything over that we agree upon prior to committing. It's perfect, Padmé. Think about it. I still get attention, you still get to use your gifts and we both have time away from each other when we need it."

She opened her mouth, presumably to argue, then sighed, shoulders relaxing a little. "How many hours are we talking?"

"I don't know. Twenty-five?"

"Fifteen," was her prompt reply.

"Twenty-two."

"Eighteen."

"Twenty and I won't go any lower."

Her eyes narrowed and then she raised a brow. Padmé sat back in her seat, a reluctant grin upon her lips. Her anxiety was gone. "Agreed. Is that number negotiable?"

"After six months."

"Okay, Anakin, I'll work part-time." Her smile widened. "Negotiator."

"I did learn from the best. Obi-Wan wasn't called the negotiator for nothing, you know."

"I know." She shook her head. "I'll call the service and have a chef sent over, then begin arranging the other domestic matters as they were.... Unless there was something that absolutely can't be delegated?"

"There are some matters, milady, but those are best discussed between us privately."

She flushed becomingly and smoothed her dress.

Only then did he remember Doc Sonas was in the room. "Okay, Doc, what's next?"

Sonas was busy making notations and glanced up. "That was a good session. You're making progress in communicating. Let's skip the next session and see how we are in two weeks. Keep writing in your journals and make note of any matters that need discussed. Remember, we can schedule a session whenever you both feel it's needed."

The session had been far more painless than he'd thought. Anakin left feeling pleased and content.

---

Who knew that they could talk like that? Padmé reflected upon that the entire way back to the apartment. Everything had worked out to her advantage. She didn't need to do the cooking and cleaning anymore and could take some of those speaking engagements she'd wanted to take. She was feeling blissful in how well their relationship was progressing. They were learning to talk to each other and it wasn't as horrible an undertaking as she'd feared. He didn't get angry like he had previously and when he did, he excused himself until he was calm enough to return to the discussion. They were communicating the way they should have years earlier.

She had to admit that Sonas really did seem to be helping.

They ate at her favorite restaurant, then retired for a romantic evening together. Her dreams were happy ones, until....

Padmé jerked awake, her pleasant dreams rudely interrupted by a loud crashing noise that was followed by a series of equally loud thumps. Rolling over, she flailed one arm across the nightstand, overturning one water glass, a few knick-knacks, and a data pad. Gradually, her sleep-fuddled mind registered that there was no blaster by her bedside and that she had no need of one.

The thumps and crashes were rhythmic.

Tossing off the covers and dimly aware that she'd somehow ended up back in her own apartment, she half-crawled, half-stumbled out of the bedroom and down the hall towards the front door. Opening it, she proceeded towards the sounds into Anakin's apartment.

There, in the center of the living area, was the biggest, gaudiest colored drum set she'd ever set eyes on, with her husband banging away at it. When he noticed her, he paused, hands still raised and a slight irreverent curl to the corners of his mouth.

"Did I wake you?"



Padmé blinked. “What is this,” she managed to croak, dragging the strap of her nightgown back up her shoulder.

“Music therapy. Doc said to learn an instrument, or don’t you remember that from those letters? I think I mentioned it once or twice.”

“So you chose the most irritating instrument you could find?”

His teeth flashed in a wide grin. “In a manner of speaking. Palpatine always abhorred drums. He called them base and crude, preferring a full orchestra. Naturally, I decided there had to be some merit to them. You know, there *are* subtleties to rhythm that most people don’t notice.”

“Really.” She sniffed, hoping to smell a caffeinated beverage brewing, then remembered that he liked his caffeine at lunchtime.

“Oh yes. For example, on Nanos III, the particular beat indicates what a man wants. This one,” he demonstrated, ‘means he’s going on a hunt. And this one,’ he switched to a muted and much softer tapping, “means he’s planning on getting lucky.”

She rolled her eyes. “Not before he explains how and when the drums got here and feeds his wife a really hearty breakfast.”

Anakin set the drumsticks aside. “I had them brought in through the verandah this morning. I’ve been practicing on a tiny set that has electronic settings. *I* could barely hear it on high, so I decided to treat myself to the set I really wanted.”

“How much did it cost?” She asked more out of curiosity than of outrage for the use of credits.

“About as much as two small moons.”

“Oh. Can you mute it?”

He frowned. “Why would I want to?” Anakin appeared genuinely puzzled by her request.

Padmé sighed. “I think we’re going to need to set down some rules here....”

---

Dormé was herself again. Obi-Wan was glad to see that finally come about. With her usual energy, she read up on the latest nutritional articles, enrolled herself and Don-Al in ‘mommy and me’ exercise classes, had to be persuaded not to enroll him and Don-Al in ‘daddy and me’ exercise classes (he’d been sorely tempted to use a mind-trick on her even though he knew it wouldn’t work), and decided to become re-certified as a handmaiden in order to apply for a position as an advisor and sponsor for new handmaidens. Eirtaé had told her of the new program, one that would give her freedom to work on worlds aside from Naboo. She’d be a freelance advisor.

The problem behind her mood swings and crying had been identified. Apparently, she’d had a normal hormonal imbalance that sometimes occurs in new mothers, easily fixed with medication.

Obi-Wan stretched. Anakin and Padmé had gone to spend a week with her family and as of a few hours ago, Anakin had been a bundle of nerves. Why? Heck if Obi-Wan knew. It wasn't like Anakin had never met Padmé's family before. Oh well. Dormé was at exercise class, along with their son, so he had all afternoon to sit around doing nothing. Blissful time alone. He'd spent an hour meditating, finished the novel he'd been reading and considered solo lightsaber practice before the pull of taking a nice long nap overcame him.

Sliding a pillow beneath his head, he closed his eyes to nap.

"So what are we planning today?" Qui-Gon's voice was gratingly cheerful.

"I am planning on napping." He opened one eye, fixing it on Qui-Gon. "You are planning on letting me."

"No, I'm not."

Obi-Wan groaned. "Why not? I'm barely getting enough sleep as it is. Don-Al refuses to sleep through the night —"

"Master Yoda wishes you to meet him at the Temple in one hour."

Obi-Wan was instantly awake. "Master Yoda is back on Coruscant?"

"Briefly, yes. He wishes to conduct this business and return to exile before Anakin returns to Coruscant."

Yoda had been unbending on that issue. He refused to leave exile fully until it was apparent where Anakin was going in his quest for re-integration. He didn't wish Anakin to know where he was in the event that Vader returned. A cautious route and one Obi-Wan had argued hours with him. By Qui-Gon being used as a messenger service, he concluded that Yoda was still annoyed with him somewhat. "Master?"

"The Temple, Obi-Wan."

In an hour, he understood the business.

Palpatine had taken the Jedi Temple and used it for his own amusements. He'd walled up entire sections seemingly at random and sold the various pieces of Jedi antiquity for a likely tidy profit. Upon his death, the Temple had been deeded to the Coruscant Historical Society. They had a plan for the Temple and wished to include the remaining Jedi Council members in the planning. Their idea was to mark off a portion of the Temple for a museum and return the rest to the Jedi.

Yoda listened to their plans, made his own proposed changes over the next few days. Soon the full agreement was hammered out. The Temple would be halved in a manner of speaking, yet still functional for the needs of the greatly diminished Order.

While Obi-Wan tried to convince him to stay longer, he declined, stating only that it wasn't time for him to see Anakin.

Obi-Wan finished his series of saber movements and paused to wipe the sweat from his brow. Yoda had accused him of still not seeing Anakin, of being too attached to him. The accusation had stung. He didn't feel he was too close to Anakin this time. Indeed, he thought

their relationship had become what it should have been to begin with. They were honest with each other on all levels, Anakin confiding his worries and Obi-Wan reciprocating.

Master Yoda was being too cautious. Or was he? There was still a bit of the dark side in Anakin. It was there.

He sighed, turning off his light saber and sitting. He'd distracted himself and needed to re-center within the Force before continuing.

---

How had Anakin emerged from Vader? That was the question on the table and the one Anakin wished to share. He looked at Padmé, then Doc. These past months had helped him more than he could have imagined possible years earlier. Why hadn't he asked for help sooner?

Pride, he answered himself. He'd had too much pride in his veins to even consider there was anything he couldn't do himself. He smiled a little. What a long way he'd come from that arrogant youth he'd been!

"I tricked him," he told them, arching a brow. "I used his own underhanded tactics against him." He shrugged. "Palpatine told Vader to delete my personal files, that it was unhealthy to keep them. Vader hadn't bothered to look at them until then. He didn't concern himself with my memories. He began deleting them, moving from file to file and finally...."

He lost himself in the memory.

*Darkness and Vader, the two constants since he'd killed Padmé. He was blind and deaf unless Vader let him rise, which only happened when Vader wished to taunt him about something. Like now.*

*"Look at these files, Anakin."*

*He looked. There were hundreds of files, things he'd collected over the years. Most were music and pictures, but there were text files as well. He'd kept novels, cartoons, jokes and letters from friends now long dead. Most of it he'd meant to purge long ago. "I see them," he replied.*

*"My Master tells me it's unhealthy to keep them. I thought you might wish to be present for their deletion." He opened one file, backed out of it without opening any of the sub-files and deleted it. "So easy to read. Did you think no curious eyes perused your files? I'm certain Obi-Wan and Padmé did."*

*Anakin gritted his teeth, watched Vader repeat the process over and over until he reached the final file. He relaxed. This file was special.*

*Vader shook his head. "The 'angel' file. How original. That wouldn't be about Padmé, would it? Everyone in the galaxy knew you called her your angel. Pathetic."*

*Such smugness and scorn in his tone, as though Anakin could not surprise him. Or could he?*

Vader tried to open it. "Password?" His annoyance wrapped about Anakin. 'We'll see about that.' He tried every possible variation on Padmé's name. Each try brought forth error messages. Vader growled at Anakin's chuckles. "Give me the password."

"Don't you know it?"

"What's in the file? Tell me!"

Anakin sat down in his prison and crossed his arms. "It's nothing about Padmé. Have you never heard of a 'smokescreen'?"

"Of course I have. I order you to tell me what's in the file!"

Anakin's mirth increased. "Make me. I dare you."

Vader went silent.

"Go on, Vader. Make me. Choke me. Isn't that your specialty?" He sobered. "Oh wait a minute. You can't choke yourself, now can you? Quite a quandary. What do you do?"

Vader could have turned the file over to a droid or let the computer do the work, but he didn't. He wanted to break the code himself. He wished to break Anakin down that little bit more.

In his irritation, Vader forgot to suppress Anakin.

For four days, Vader puzzled the password with no success. At last, Vader let Anakin rise. It wasn't fully, but it was enough to have an inkling how to take back control.

"Open the file, Anakin."

With a grim determination, Anakin gave the password. Before Vader could suppress him, he opened the first sub-file. A picture of him with Padmé appeared. Ellé had taken it... He let memories burst free, propelling to the surface. He rode them as he would a current of air or water.

He wrestled Vader for control, Vader trying to delete the file and Anakin refusing to give up use of their hands. More memories flooded him. They were Vader's memories and horrible images. Anakin shook their helmeted head, somewhat surprised by the cumbersome weight, though he knew he should remember it. Desperately, he opened images, embraced the love he'd had for Padmé.

That love had been real no matter how it had ended.

Force save me, I was wrong, Anakin thought and then he was in darkness once more.

He was half afraid of what he'd find, but he opened his eyes anyway, dreading that odd sensation of weightlessness he'd had in his prison.

Anakin saw though Vader's ruined vision, heard clearly the wheezing whoosh of his breath. He felt... weight. Vader had managed to delete the file, but it had served its purpose. Anakin looked around his quarters and decided there had to be a change. He couldn't keep living this way. Darkness, death, destruction, and far too much pain for a single person to bear.

*Vader, he decided, had to disappear. If it took him the rest of his life, he would regain control of his body.*

*He promised himself that. It was one promise he was determined never to break.*

When his narration of the events ended, he discovered Padmé holding back her tears. Her emotions were clear on her face.

“I love you, Anakin,” she whispered.

“I know.” Reaching between their chairs, he took her hand in his. “I love you, too.”

---

Breha was gone. Padmé gave Leia and Bail the support they needed and after three months, was surprised when Bail asked if she’d like to have Leia with her for a weekend visit. He had business on Coruscant and thought Leia would enjoy the visit.

Padmé agreed. She was looking forward to having both Luke and Leia at the same time. She knew the time was coming to tell Anakin the truth, yet found that step harder to make as the weeks had passed. Luke arrived a full two days before Leia. His excitement over seeing Leia again was infectious and together they planned several outings they could take.

The two of them were having such a marvelous time while Anakin was practicing technique with Obi-Wan that she was unprepared for Luke’s question.

“Why can’t I live here with you permanently?”

She paused in gluing two craft sticks together. ‘Because I say so’ wasn’t going to end his questioning, was it? “It’s complicated, Luke. You know that.”

“It’s not complicated. I want to live here with you.”

“That’s not possible right now. You know better, Luke.” She set the sticks aside, keeping a stern edge to her voice. In the past, such an edge had stalled his arguments, but it wasn’t working this time. This time, he was insistent and then....

Anakin was standing in front of them, a strange expression on his face. It was somewhere between anger and shock. She braced herself for the discussion to come.

## Ch 24: The Twins Revealed

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter 24: The Twins Revealed

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

---

The three hour session sparring with Obi-Wan had cleared away the tension in his muscles and Anakin was ready for a long hot shower. He anticipated a fun evening entertaining Luke. Padmé would have everything planned by now. He liked how their life was turning out. Little by little, everything was falling into place like he'd hoped years earlier it would.

He went straight into his apartment, first grabbing a snack, then cleaning up from his afternoon of exercise. On the way across the verandah, he slowed his pace, finally stopping just outside Padmé's open door. She and Luke were upset. Should he go in or let her deal with whatever the problem was before joining them? Padmé's voice held exasperation and Luke's a touch of pleading.

"You know better, Luke."

"Why *can't* I live here with you," the boy persisted. A reasonable question. Luke didn't like Tatooine any more than Anakin did.

Anakin still wasn't clear why *Luke* stayed with them so much. He knew why Leia had stayed with them. Bail had arranged it so Leia wouldn't have to see her mother suffer during medical treatments.

"We've been through this."

"But, *mom*, I don't like farming! I want to be with you and dad!"

He wasn't aware he'd moved, but suddenly he was standing in the room with them, Luke's words echoing in his mind. One word, actually. *Mom*.

Padmé shook her head when she saw him. "Later, Luke. Go play with your ship models or plan an adventure to have with Leia when she arrives tomorrow."

Luke took one look at Anakin and left without argument.

He tried to sort out his feelings in a calm fashion. Mom. Padmé was Luke's mother, which meant.... "Luke is our son."

“Yes.”

His mouth went dry. “He’s not Luke Lars, he’s Luke Skywalker and the reason he’s here so much suddenly makes sense.” His heartbeat was wild in his chest. “Where is our daughter, the one you told me about?” He was able to answer his own questions, the answers right there in front of him. The pieces fit together and he couldn’t believe he hadn’t seen it all straight away. “Leia. Leia is ours too. I should have known. She’s you in miniature.” The first signs of his anger were appearing. There was his heartbeat, then the dry mouth and his stomach clenched. He knew those signs and began backing away. “You ignored my wishes. I was fine with details, but you brought them to me, Padmé. You brought them.”

“Anakin —”

“I can’t discuss this, not now. Did you think my reasons for not seeing them were frivolous? Ridiculous?”

“No. I thought —”

He touched his fingertips to his temples, the tension that had been worked out returning, throbbing. “Don’t come to me. I’ll come to you when I’m ready to discuss this.” Gritting his teeth, he turned on his heel and left. In a few hours, or perhaps a day or two, he’d be ready to talk with her.

As he walked, he turned the matter over and over in his mind. Why had she ignored his wishes? Why do something she’d known would make him angry?

*Because she doesn’t really love you. She just did what she wanted—*

Vader’s voice in his mind surprised him, made him pause in his strides. Anakin tipped his head back, stared at the lanes of traffic a minute. Padmé loved him no matter what Vader said. She’d never do anything to hurt him, not intentionally. Perhaps she hadn’t thought his meeting the children would hurt if they weren’t introduced as such.

*She deliberately kept them from you.*

The whispering was so soft it was barely there, but it was there. Anakin shook his head. That was wrong. Padmé didn’t deliberately keep them from him. She’d found a way for him to know them. By the time Anakin returned to his apartment, he still wasn’t ready to talk, though his temper had leveled out. He meditated and thought and waited for the right time. Though the night was lonely without Padmé beside him, he needed time to decide what to say when they did speak.

---

That went well, Padmé thought, slumping in her seat. Not exactly the reunion of father and children she’d imagined. Throughout the rest of the day, Anakin wouldn’t see her. Her knocks went unanswered and his apartment doors remained locked. He’d shut her out, which wasn’t a good omen of things to come. She tried not to worry.

She soothed Luke’s worries that he was the cause of Anakin’s upset and hoped that by morning, Anakin would want to talk. Morning, however, saw no sign of him and by the time Leia arrived, he had yet to appear.

Leia immediately took charge of the situation, disappearing briefly with Luke before trying a direct route. “I’m going to visit Anakin”, she announced, heading for the door with her head held up in a regal manner.

Sweetie, Padmé thought, I *invented* that look in this family. Don’t try it with me. She caught her, only to discover that Luke had gone around to the verandah door and was trying to pick the lock. Padmé didn’t miss the look of disdain Leia treated Luke to, as though she could have done better. She soon found the two unwilling to let the matter drop. To their way of thinking, Anakin’s refusal to see anyone was intriguing and worth pursuing.

Their plans to get at Anakin were constructed with a tight military precision that would have made her proud under other circumstances. As it was, she was trying to corral two very determined and headstrong children by herself. Within a few hours, she was exhausted.

Obi-Wan and Dormé arrived at dinnertime, Obi-Wan carrying in a struggling Leia.

“Padmé, are you missing something? A little Leia, by chance?”

She sent Leia back to play and dropped into a chair, accepting Don-Al from Dormé. Leia was the troublemaker, the reckless one, and Luke would follow along after telling Leia not to do whatever it was she was planning.

“What is going on?” Dormé asked, removing her coat and sitting.

Relaxing in slow increments, she explained. As she finished and before either of her friends could comment, Leia appeared, contrite and charming. It was a long while before Padmé noticed Luke had grown awfully quiet in the bedroom. Quiet, as she’d learned, was a bad thing with children. It meant they were doing things they shouldn’t.

“Leia? Where’s Luke?”

Alarm flashed in her eyes. “In the bedroom playing.”

Padmé gave her a stern stare and raised a brow. She didn’t need Force powers to know Leia was not being truthful.

Leia attempted to return the stare, but couldn’t hold it nearly as long as Padmé could. She crossed her arms and looked at the floor. “He’s out on the ledge circling the building to Anakin’s apartment.”

Padmé’s heart felt caught in her throat. What if he fell? She hurried to the bedroom. Sure enough, the window was opened, curtains fluttering. There was no sign of Luke. Turning, she began to check each window on that side of the building looking for him.

---

His children’s determined attempts to reach him were amusing. He’d heard everything, since Leia seemed to think that if he heard them, he’d open the door. Anakin had kept a Force hold on the doors, barely managing to keep Luke out. Where had the boy learned to pick a lock so fast? Somehow, he didn’t think it was something Owen would consider a proper skill.

He soon found Leia as much of a threat, if not more so, in the lock department. She had the process down to half Luke’s speed. My children are lock-picking prodigies, he thought with a



smile.

He sensed Padmé's frustration with the two. Anakin climbed out onto the ledge to meet Luke. It was a dangerous undertaking, walking the ledge around the building. How had Leia persuaded him to do it? No matter, he decided, keeping close tabs on him. If Luke fell, he'd go after him, using the Force and air currents to reach him.

Luke didn't fall, instead coming and sitting beside him. He swung his feet off the ledge and grinned, obviously delighted with himself. "Leia said I was crazy to do this. She said it was too dangerous, that I'd be *killed*."

Leia had a knack for reverse psychology. Anakin suppressed a smile. "It is dangerous."

"You're out here," Luke pointed out.

"I'm an adult." The comment made Luke nod in a wise manner. He was at that age where simply saying one was an adult sufficiently explained most matters. "Luke, who is Padmé to you?"

He stared at the Coruscant skyline. "She's my mom and Aunt Beru's friend. They used to give each other things when she lived near us. Mostly girl things. Uncle Owen used to take me to see her, but then he stopped and Aunt Beru was real sad."

Anakin nodded.

"Why are you mad at us?"

"I'm not mad at you or Leia. Padmé did something that I'd asked her not to and it upset me." Which summed up the matter neatly. "Luke, do you know who I am?"

Now Luke looked at him. His eyes were solemn. "You're Anakin Skywalker and you're my father."

Had Padmé told him?

Luke shrugged. "I wasn't s'posed to know. I overheard Uncle Owen talking to Aunt Beru and he said things that weren't very nice. I don't think you're like he says. I think you're a good man."

"Thank you, Luke, I..." He broke off. Padmé was frantic. 'We'll talk more later. I think Padmé has discovered you're gone.' He stood. "Come on, let's get back inside, so she'll quit worrying."

Obi-Wan and Dormé excused themselves, leaving Anakin and Padmé to talk with the two children. There would come time later when Anakin and Padmé would discuss the matter between them. They sat down with the children, Padmé asking the two to explain what they both knew to Anakin. Luke and Leia, he found, already knew he was their father and Padmé was their mother. They were relieved to have the secret out, Luke exclaiming that he didn't like secrets.

Who *hadn't* known the truth, Anakin wondered. It seemed he'd been the only one unaware who Luke and Leia were. Leia was openly smug about having two dads and a second mom, yet Luke wasn't as pleased.

"Can I live here with you," Luke asked, the expression on his face earnest and seeking. There was desperation in his tone.

Padmé shook her head. "No sweetie —"

"Why not?" Luke cut her off. "Uncle Owen doesn't really want me. Don't *you*?" Without letting her answer, he ran from the room.

Luke's emotions were nearly seething and Anakin wondered just where that thought had come from. Why did he think that Owen didn't want him? He squeezed her hand. "Let me, okay?" He found Luke packing his bag with angry jerks and closed the door, going to the bed and sitting. "Going somewhere?"

The boy scowled. "I'm leaving. No one wants me, so I'll go where I want!"

"Running away isn't going to solve anything, Luke."

Luke paused. "Do *you* want me?"

"Of course I do."

"Can I live with you?"

Anakin wished it could be so, but he thought he knew why Padmé wouldn't let him, and it wasn't because of him. She would be sensitive to the needs of the children and their foster families both. "Luke, tell me something. Do you know why your aunt doesn't have any children?"

The answer was prompt. "She can't. We spent two days at some medical facility and she cried the whole trip. When we got home, Uncle Owen told me that I was their gift and Aunt Beru baked for four whole days."

He nodded slowly. He could imagine Beru's sadness and the sort of emotions Owen must have felt. "Does that sound like he doesn't want you?"

Luke looked somewhat convinced.

"I'm sure your aunt wants you very much. From what I have seen, she loves you as a mother would."

He shoved the bag aside and climbed up on the bed beside Anakin. "Uncle Owen says she spoils me too much."

"She probably does." He tousled Luke's hair. 'And where did you get the idea that Padmé doesn't want you? Luke, she loves you very much.' Privately, he'd thought she was hoping for more children and substituting Luke and Leia until such a moment. "She completely rearranges her schedule when she's expecting you and Leia just so she can spend the entire time with you."

"Really?"

"Really. And I look forward to your visits as well." Luke's visits had been another bright part of his life.

"But why can't I *live* here?" The question burning in Luke's mind.

Anakin thought a moment on the best way to explain it to Luke. "Because it would be cruel to your Aunt and Uncle to take you from them when they've raised you this long. They are attached to you and you to them. As much as we'd like to have you with us, we don't wish to cause undue pain to anyone. You will stay with them and that's final. No more hassling Padmé...your *mother*. Understood?"

With a frown, Luke nodded. He swung his feet. After a moment, his features scrunched up. "Are you really a Jedi?"

Anakin paused. He hadn't been expecting the change in conversational direction. "I was a Jedi once. Why?"

"Can I be one, too?"

The innocent question brought more questions, but first, he needed to talk with Padmé. Once the twins were in bed asleep, their own discussion began. Padmé was hesitant.

"I'm sorry, Anakin. I knew your reasons, but I never expected you to overhear. Luke knew he wasn't supposed to call me mom and he kept doing it anyway. I wanted you to know them in some capacity and it bothered me that you thought you couldn't ever know them. I thought that it wouldn't be long before you *could* know."

"Were you planning on telling me?"

"Of course!" She shifted a little in her seat. "Eventually. I've been trying to find a way to mention it without seeming... insensitive."

"Insensitive? You ignored my wishes completely, didn't even take them into account. That's a little more than insensitive," he told her with arms crossed.

Her brow furled with annoyance. "I realize that, Anakin. I'm trying to apologize. One mistruth led to another and at times, I felt as though I was lurching from one cover-up to another trying to keep you in the dark over their identities. I never meant to ignore your wishes. I thought that you didn't know, so there was no harm."

Her explanation caused a spark of humor inside him. One mistruth to another to cover up the truth? Anakin laughed. The expression on Padmé's face shifted to confusion, which only made him laugh harder. "Isn't that our story, Padmé? One mistruth after another?"

She stared at him, shrugged slowly. "I suppose you could put it that way. I *wouldn't*."

He sighed, shook his head. "Okay, the issue is in the past. You did what you thought best and it backfired in the long run. I could have been more open to meeting them at a later date instead of refusing completely." Anakin leaned back, stretched his arms along the couch back. "It'll take some getting used to. I don't know how to be a father, Padmé."

Sliding across to snuggle against him, she gave another shrug. "Who does until it happens? They'll still live where they are. Unless," she added, "you have an objection to that?"

"No objections. They're needed where they are and as has been pointed out, we can have more children." He felt her stiffen and she leaned back to look up at him.

"Will we, Anakin?"

"I'd like to finish the reintegration first, but let's be optimistic and believe we can try in a couple years?"

Her smile was radiant and filled with relief and love. "I'd like that Ani."

He dreamed that night of a household filled with children and laughter.

---

Over the next few days, many things were decided regarding the twins. As both had Force potential, Obi-Wan was approached regarding training in Jedi ways. Bail, Owen and Beru were consulted on the matter. It was agreed that Obi-Wan would train Luke and Leia if they showed an interest and only if Anakin's involvement would be on the periphery. It was Luke alone who expressed an interest in Jedi training. Leia politely refused. She had her eyes firmly fixed upon a Senatorial career. The training would be vastly different from what it had been in the past. Luke was going to stay with Owen and Beru and Obi-Wan would give him exercises to work on. Every couple weeks, Obi-Wan would visit Luke to check his progress.

Padmé was rather satisfied with how they had arranged matters. She was pleased that more children could be in the future if they wanted and Anakin was making terrific progress in the reintegration.

She sat down and perused her schedule for the week. Four speaking engagements and five dates with Anakin. She was planning the next week when a holo from Dormé came through. Her friend was not pleased, turning right to the subject bothering her.

"*Milady*, I've been told that the ivy all over my cottage was your doing?" She arched a brow.

Oops. "Oh that. I paid to have it removed."

"Yes, well, it's back. The whole entire south-west side is completely covered and growing into the house. It came through the foundation."

"It can't be back. They told me they'd gotten it all."

"Liars," Dormé muttered, then smiled. 'Actually, I wanted to let you know we've arrived safely and begun to move in. I begin my final training in three days and I've already a charge lined up. It seems my part in hiding you, that and marrying Ben, has given me something of a notoriety.' She laughed. "I had my pick of charges, Padmé. Amazing."

They talked for a long while.

---

Qui-Gon watched Anakin sleep. Sometimes it amazed him that the boy he'd known had grown into first one kind of man and then another. Time didn't have the relevance to him as it did to everyone else, so he was always surprised by the visible signs of passing upon those he knew. To him, Anakin was still a little boy. For that matter, so was Obi-Wan. Both were adult though and he needed to keep them in perspective.

His glance turned to Padmé for a brief second. It was amusing how these two kept separate bedrooms, yet took turns sleeping in both of them. It seemed that neither wished to give up

their apartment independence, keeping separate spaces as their own. Perhaps that was what they needed at this juncture in their lives. Whatever the reason, their relationship was healthy.

The only glitch left was Vader. There was still a sense of the dark side in Anakin, lurking and waiting. It was low and barely there, but there nonetheless. How much, he wondered, did Vader actually see and hear of the galaxy now? Was he suppressed deep enough that he was as blind as he'd made Anakin? Or was he waiting for a weakness to appear in order to rise once more?

Qui-Gon shook his head. He'd had too much time to reflect on this matter and it was putting him in a morbid mood. He'd found himself thinking that for a single burst of willpower on Anakin's part, Palpatine would still be ruling and the galaxy leveled further by terror. Without that burst, Vader would be strong and none of what had occurred recently would ever have occurred. What would have happened to the children? To Padmé, Dormé and Obi-Wan?

He sighed. There was no point in dwelling on what could have been, was there?

On the bed, Anakin began stirring into wakefulness. With a last fatherly glance at them both, Qui-Gon took his leave of them.

## Ch 25 and Epilogue: End of the Road

---

Title: The Long Road Back

Author: kasey8473

Summary: AU. After four years as Vader, Anakin has a change of heart. He begins a journey back into himself. Padmé finds a way to help him.

Chapter 25 and Epilogue: The End of the Road

Rating: M

Disclaimer: Star Wars is the property of George Lucas. No disrespect is intended.

Notes: There are alternate versions of the previous two chapters up on my website if anyone is interest. Also, thank you to my beta, GemL. Any gramatical, etc. errors are mine alone.

---

The time had come. Anakin knew it as soon as he woke. He was ready to face Vader a final time. Determination traversed his veins. After today, Vader would be gone. He had breakfast and headed for his appointment, kissing Padmé on the way out the door.

Anakin looked at Doc, then beside him. Vader was there in all of his ruined glory. He saw the scarring, the streaks of blackened, dead skin and open wounds. Vader stood without the suit, looking as he must have just after the new limbs had been attached. His features were grossly distorted with rage and hate, his eyes bright with Sith yellow and red. When he spoke, spittle flew from his mouth.

*Don't do it, Anakin. Don't shove me away. You remember how it hurt, how you failed her. You can't face this alone, without me.*

"Anakin? Tell me how you felt when your mother died."

*I cared for you then, didn't I? I made them pay for what they did and you let me. You let me!*

He took a deep breath. "Helpless. I felt helpless."

*Her body was beaten, tied. Remember the marks? It was an injustice, Anakin. They didn't try hard enough to save her. How hard could it have been really? They didn't want to save her. But I... I helped you. I made them pay for their actions. I cared enough to do something for you. No one else cared like I did, like I **do**.*

"If I had gotten there sooner, would she have died?" Anakin licked his lips with a frown. "I think now that she would have. She'd held on as long as she could and I found her right as her will finally gave out. I even wonder if Palpatine somehow arranged her abduction. I felt overwhelmed, at war with myself over my feelings. I thought that as a Jedi, I wasn't allowed

to feel a wanting of revenge or deep grief. I'd misinterpreted many things they tried to teach me. When I did succumb, I felt guilty."

Vader growled. *No, no, I won't let you do this!* His hands raised, slashed at the air as though trying to use the Force to throw objects about the room.

Anakin felt the surging of Vader inside him, as helpless in desperation as he had been at the Tusken camp. Vader helpless. How long had he waited for the moment when Vader would no longer hold sway over him! Anakin blinked. "I loved her so much, Doc. I never stopped missing her, not one day. Obi-Wan tried to give me the parental affection, but it was her I needed. I can even see how I used Padmé as a partial substitute. I can accept that."

"Can you let your mother go, Anakin?"

The question had been one he'd been considering for quite some time. Letting go did not mean forgetting. He knew that now.

*Anakin please, Vader switched tactics, his voice pleading in a gentle, mild tone. Don't do this. Don't send me away. I am the only one who fully understands you. I protected you from so much pain. We've been together for so long—*

True. Once, however, they had been a single person. They would be so again, only this time, Anakin had the skills he needed to deal with anger and emotional pain. This step did not frighten him anymore. "Yes, Doc. I can let her go. I *will* let her go."

Vader fell to the floor, one arm and both legs gone, flesh smoking. *I hate you! I hate you!* His remaining hand stretched out to touch Anakin's boot....

They tumbled backwards together in time, reliving key moments, those that had caused Vader's rising.

First, Mustafar. Anakin chose not to fight Obi-Wan, nor did he choke Padmé or kill the Separatists. Moving backwards, making choices in his — their — memories, negating Vader's power little by little until they reached his earliest memories of Vader persuading him.

The adult Anakin looked at his child twin, the dark part of him that had first grasped the lure of temptation. "This isn't death, you know." He crouched down so that they were eye to eye. "I know now that it's okay to feel these things, but I'm not going to let you take over. I'm giving you a choice, Vader. You can live in isolation forever or you can be a part of me. Isolation means loneliness. You know what that feels like."

The child's brows came together in a frown, yet adult eyes glared at him. *I do.* The words were clipped.

"If you choose to be a part of me, it will be a normal part, the one you should have played from the beginning. No separation. Your choice Vader. I don't need you."

The malice crumbled away from the youth's face and Anakin saw himself as a boy, whole and a bit uncertain. What he'd been for a short while. *But I need you, Anakin. I have always needed you to live.* Slowly, the boy came to him. *The choice is no choice and you know it. Either way, I die.*

"Perhaps."

*You have me cornered.*

"In a manner of speaking."

*I could resist.*

"You could," he agreed. "But you won't be able to grow. You'll be forever insignificant, small and powerless."

The child laughed. *I'll be that regardless. Separate and imprisoned or part of you and gone. There is no difference. However, I will choose, since you insist. I will be a part of you.* "The malice returned, twisting his features. *And may you forever wonder if I'll find a way free.*

As the child's hand took his, Anakin replied, "It doesn't work that way, Vader. You're absorbed into me and we are whole. Finally. You no longer exist."

There was no final tug of resistance, Vader melting into Anakin, merging with him until only Anakin was left in the tiny slave quarters he remembered from childhood. Without pausing for a final glance backwards, Anakin strode back through his memories into the present.

"Anakin?"

He heard the worry in Doc's voice and looked up, smiling. "I'm okay, Doc." The session continued and Anakin reflected upon how he felt. There was a complete peace inside him that had never before been there and later, with his wife and friends around him, he knew that the process was nearly completed. He was whole, yet one thing remained.

Soon, he would have to go to Tatooine.

Anakin planned the trip for a few weeks in the future, enough time to arrange matters to his satisfaction, but in the end, it was set later due to Bail and Owen's requests. Bail wanted Leia to finish her quarter of schooling without interruption and Owen had objections due to the busy farming season. Anakin had an idea in his mind as to what this trip should accomplish and once it was laid out the way he wanted, he relaxed, making trips to the Jedi Temple to watch the construction and easing back in to a Jedi style of living — one that included his wife, of course.

He meditated regularly, eventually staking claim on a room in the Temple and was surprised to find Jedi that had hidden and survived the purge returning to the Temple. They greeted him with congratulations on his part in disposing of Palpatine and expressed an interest in returning to the Temple. Anakin had Obi-Wan contact Yoda for directions. He didn't know what to tell them. The Order, as it had been, was no more. This small band of Jedi, many of whom were teenagers, needed direction and focus and Anakin didn't want to be the one to give it. He'd tired of doing so while pretending to be Vader.

Yoda's response was unexpected and it was on a warm sunny day that Anakin found himself in the former Council chambers thinking about that response and the events leading from it. Yoda's message had been long and filled with proposed changes to the rules of the Order. If such changes had been put into effect when Anakin was a child, then he would not have experienced much of his feelings of guilt as an adult. Gone were the rules of a child leaving family behind. Removed was the restriction on marriage. Also left to the past was the



rule regarding age. Each case would be evaluated individually and the specific needs of that person scrutinized.

Back and forth they went through Obi-Wan until that one refused to be a messenger any longer. Yoda then returned to Coruscant, coming to speak to Anakin personally. He'd rested his hands on his cane and nodded in that wise manner he had as he looked Anakin up and down. "Progress completed," he'd said and turned immediately to the matter at hand.

Anakin was left in charge of those returning to Coruscant. With the new rules in place, he simply had to give gentle direction. There was no need to watch over them, only to be ready to advise should it be needed.

He considered it all as the hours passed, until the Coruscant skyline was teeming with rush hour traffic. Twilight descended, lowering to meet the bright city lights and painting the sky brilliant shades of red and purple.

Anakin watched it all with an impassive gaze, his thoughts finally turning inward, dwelling upon the changes in himself since absorbing and negating Vader. This was not a brood, but rather a time of joyful meditation, a glorying in his condition and how far he had come from what he had been. With full integration behind him, it was as though the Force had fully embraced him, re-shaped him and ultimately turned back the clock. The process he'd felt occurring during the Clone Wars had begun again, power shooting through him at an accelerated rate.

He was at peace, flowing in unison with the swelling crests of the Force. At times in the past, he'd felt outside of time, able to look forward and backwards with ease and see what was going to happen. Vader had done it often, though his experience had been tainted by the dark side. This feeling was constant now. He was fully balanced and fully himself.

I am what I was supposed to be, he thought with a nod. There was only one path before him and he saw glimpses of what it held, some certain and others possible. The glimpses did not frighten. He knew that Padmé was pregnant, that she was at home this moment working with the chef to prepare a fancy meal to tell him. He knew that Luke was progressing already in his exercises and wanted to please his parents and he knew....

A presence was approaching. He waited patiently for the man to arrive. After a moment, he smile and cocked his head, using a greeting from the far past. "Hello Mister Qui-Gon, sir."

He turned, feeling very much like a boy before his father. Indeed, Qui-Gon had been a fatherly influence for a brief period, giving direction when he'd needed it.

"Hello Anakin. May I join you?"

"Please do."

Qui-Gon's appearance was as Obi-Wan had said and what he already knew from those quick glimpses he'd had in the night, a bit blue and ghostly, yet having a solidity that defied that spectral appearance. He looked for all the galaxy like a holo-transmission. In a way, Anakin supposed he could be considered such.

"Much redecorating has occurred since I last set foot in the Temple." Qui-Gon sat, stretching his legs out. "Much has changed."

"It has." Rather than make conversation to reach the question he wanted to ask, Anakin began with it. "Why did you wait so long before seeing me, Master? I know you've watched me at night, but you never stayed to talk."

He smiled. "It's simply Qui-Gon now, Anakin. Titles mean little, as they should. And as for why...." His smile faded, lips pursing as he thought. "You have always been gifted in so many ways, extraordinary. Those night watches were to get a sense of you and of the remaining dark side in you. I was hesitant to stay too long once you began to regain consciousness, for I didn't know how far suppressed Vader was. As you've said, he was you only the flip side. Your powers under dark sway. That meant he had your gifts, your extraordinary talents. I didn't want to chance him understanding my continued existence. That is why I arrived and left when I did."

"Obi-Wan told me what's needed. Your caution was unnecessary."

A measuring gaze was slipped over him. "Obi-Wan didn't tell you everything. There is further instruction needed. Was rather. It's a moot point at this time. You've become what you were intended, balanced in the Force. I can see it. You have the knowledge inside you, the answer to your questions."

Anakin sat in the chair beside him. "You sound very positive on everything. Didn't I disappoint you when I fell?"

"You took a detour off the path, Anakin. It happens to many. Unfortunately, few manage to right themselves to the degree you have. Any disappointment I felt is gone and I can truly say that I am proud of you. You have prevailed and triumphed, returning from the deepest darkest pit of the dark side a whole man. That is not a matter to be taken lightly."

He nodded. There was a comfort in knowing this man believed in him after all that had happened. "I don't know if I can take charge, Qui-Gon. These men and women returning need someone. Master Yoda put me in charge, but..."

"You can do it, Anakin. Remember, we are all here if you need us. Simply ask for help and it will be given."

Wise words and words he intended to follow.

---

### ***Epilogue:***

Anakin Skywalker had thought many things difficult in his life. The range was great and depended upon his age at the time. In his mind, he'd imagined that walking to his mother's grave would feel like stones being dropped onto him. In reality, it was nothing of the sort.

Padmé, Luke and Leia went with him, the children holding his hands. There was no sense of weight as he knelt, no immeasurable grief that made him wish to rage at the injustice of her death. He simply remembered. Not the pain of losing her, but rather the good times. Her gentle smile, the quiet reassurances she'd given him and the warm strength of her hugs. He drew Luke and Leia to him. Where to even begin? He had so much to tell her.

"It's been a long time, mom. I have some people I'd like you to meet. These two children here, they're mine, your grandchildren. You already know Luke and the girl is Leia."

Leia settled down beside him, resting against him. Luke remained standing. Anakin and Padmé had explained what they were going to do on the short walk from the Lars homestead to the grave.

“You would be so proud of them both. I am.” He talked for awhile, telling her about them both and also their hopes for their as yet unborn child, then told the two they could return to the house. Once they had gone, he looked at Padmé. She knelt slightly behind him, one arm bracing against his back. She pressed a kiss to his shoulder in support. ‘You remember Padmé, don’t you? She’s my wife now, but....’ He returned his gaze to the stone. “I’ve done some things I’m not proud of over the years, evil things that hurt a lot of people, but I guess I just wanted to tell you that I’m finally the man you always knew I could be.”

The suns lowered in the sky as he talked and when the air cooled and the sky was awash in deep jewel tones, he let Padmé lead him inside. Much later, after the children were asleep and Padmé was helping Beru in the kitchen, he sat across from Owen at the table and cleared his throat. He didn’t think they two could ever be friends exactly, but they could get along. They had Shmi in common, and Luke. “Would you tell me what you loved most about her? Please?”

Owen’s brows raised. He considered the matter and nodded, a smile turning his lips. “Am I limited to one thing only, because I don’t think I could limit myself.”

Late into the night they shared memories of Shmi. It was a comfort to Anakin to know that others had loved her with as much emotion as he did. Anakin’s journey had ended, that long road back into himself. He was whole once more and there were new journeys to begin with those he loved.

He was ready.

**The End**